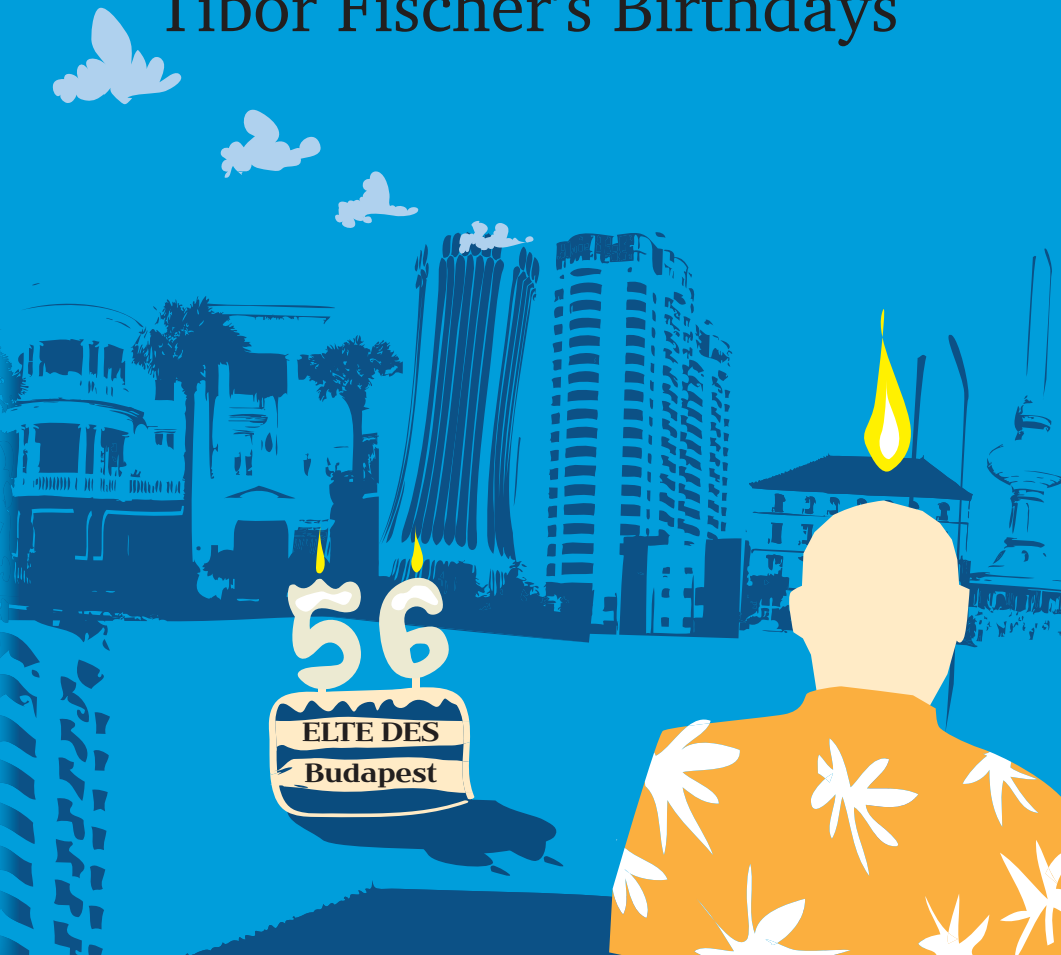
Good to Be 56

Writings in Honour of Tibor Fischer's Birthdays



Good to Be 56

ELTE Papers in English Studies

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Judit FRIEDRICH

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Writings in Honour of Tibor Fischer's Birthdays

edited by
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L'Harmattan
Department of English Studies
School of English and American Studies
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Tibor Fischer

Contents

Introduction

We mean to celebrate Tibor Fischer in this volume on the occasion of his 50th birthday. Much delayed, we still wish to thank him for the generous gifts of his time and his visits to classes at the Department of English Studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) Budapest. We thank Tibor Fischer for reading from his works and for willingly answering students' questions. We also thank him for the equally generous gift of multiple copies of his works donated to the School of English and American Studies Library, a gift which lay the groundwork to his visits.

On one occasion when Tibor Fischer visited a class where his works were the reading assigned for the day, we promised, or, rather, threatened that if he ever needed to know what his books were about we would be glad to provide the answers. The student essays presented here make good on this promise and venture to offer their interpretations and analyses of Tibor Fischer's works. These essays show how our students were inspired by his novels and how they are able to use the skills of reading, research and critical thinking, as well as the skills of making connections between the new and the old, that are among the most important we teach at the Department of English Studies at ELTE.

The structure of this volume follows the chronological order of publication of Tibor Fischer's works. The initial interest is easy to see: many Hungarian students studying English respond to the problems of national identity and cultural memory foregrounded in *Under the Frog*. As is clear to our students who encounter this work, it is written by someone who has inside knowledge of Hungary and Hungarian history yet is an English writer. Students

soon find out that Tibor Fischer was born in England and had a thoroughly English education, and that he was born to parents who left Hungary after the 1956 revolution. The double Hungarian-English perspective of *Under the Frog* allows the Hungarian reader to look at a defining period of Hungarian history from the position of insiders and outsiders simultaneously. Our students know more about Hungarian history than the average reader of Fischer's fiction but less about English and the tradition of English literature; are used to hearing about the events of 1956 but are not used to a comic tone of presentation; recognize the richness of personal detail, representing the knowledge of someone who is intimately familiar with the events of the 1956 revolution but are of the third generation after the revolution and, therefore, cannot tell whether the author presents authentic, apocryphal, or purely invented information; and notice that this work is written by someone who understands Hungarian diacritical marks and names but cannot tell whether the author actually speaks Hungarian. Students read the novel among books assigned for a course on contemporary fiction in English, along with works by Rushdie, Ishiguro, Fowles, Barnes, Naipaul or Winterson. In this context Fischer's novel is a surprise: it is part of literatures in English but the story is about Hungary. It is foreign and familiar at the same time. This novel is ideally suited for Hungarian students of English: it shows us something we thought we knew but allows us to look at it as if we saw it for the first time. Reading *Under the Frog* is also an excellent opportunity to try to understand the problems of textual representation and to explore relations between authenticity and understandability: while the story presented has to be convincing for the Hungarian reader, it also has to be clear and interesting to those who read it as an English novel.

The essays collected here were written for courses on contemporary literature in English. In these courses students typically read 6 novels per semester and were required to write an essay about a novel not discussed in class, to be selected from any of the works

written by the authors assigned for the course. This opened up the possibility to choose any novel by Tibor Fischer, and this volume shows how each of his works had its own following. The task was to write a paper of 8 to 10 typed pages, with at least 3 works cited as references, while for MA students the required length was 20 pages.

The majority of the students whose essays are featured in this volume studied within the older system of higher education in Hungary, where studies for a university degree took 5 years with a continuous curriculum, rather than being divided into separate BA and MA levels. Two authors, however, Klaudia Szabó and Mátyás Bíró were MA students in the newly introduced two-tier system. Some of the students pursued very different studies coupled with their English studies, such as double majoring in English and Mathematics, like Flóra Kollár; English and American studies, like Anna László; or English and History, like Zsófia Barlai. Two of the students presenting their work here, Magdaléna Csóti and Miklós Mikecz proceeded to study towards a PhD degree; others, like Ildikó Farkas and Anna László, chose to write their degree theses on Fischer's work, expanding on their initial efforts included in this volume.

What the students whose essays are presented in this collection had in common was their enthusiastic response to Tibor Fischer's works. Their choice of Fischer's novels for their essays testified that they were motivated to rise to the challenge: they were willing to test their skills on the works of a contemporary author whose critical evaluation is still in progress. In these essays our students attempted to formulate what they enjoyed about these novels and in what context they thought it would be enlightening to offer an analytical or critical presentation of them.

Szilvia Pálmai was inspired to write a companion piece to Fischer's first novel, *Under the Frog*, placing the story in the context of demonstrations in Budapest on the 50th anniversary of the 1956 revolution. One of the best ways to understand an author is to imitate their style, and it takes not only good observational skills and

creative talent but a near-native level of language proficiency as well to succeed at such a venture. Not surprisingly, this is the only successful attempt of its kind to date.

Zsófia Barlai attempted to answer the question of how authentic the representation of Hungary is in *Under the Frog*: she examines how Hungarian the story, the book, and the author are. She is also interested in exploring how recognizable the presentation of Hungarian history, language, and culture is in the novel. This is a question students bring up every time the novel is discussed. Often revealing underlying assumptions, these occasions offer a valuable opportunity for students to confront their own views as well as the views of one another.

Klaudia Szabó's essay represents an endeavour where the discussion of *Under the Frog* and of Hungarian history is tied in with a comparative analysis of Fischer's work and a standard classic of Hungarian literature from a hundred years earlier, *The Paul Street Boys* by Ferenc Molnár. The analysis reveals new facets of the older text, reclaiming it for adult readers after decades of being a set text for primary schools, as well as enriching the interpretation of Fischer's novel.

Flóra Kollár conducts a comparative analysis of *The Thought Gang* and *Voyage to the End of the Room*. Interestingly, very few students choose to write about *The Thought Gang* even though that is the novel they tend to like best from Fischer's oeuvre. It is all the more interesting to see which features strike students as most characteristic of these particular novels and how these features characterize Fischer's fiction. This essay shows the freshness of the reading experience as well as an analytical mind that is not unduly affected by literary critical dogma: Kollár attempts to arrange her observations around structural or thematic concepts while also exploring the world-view of both the protagonists and their author as presented in the works.

Dávid Klág sees *Voyage to the End of the Room* as an example of the fragmented novel, influenced by Joris-Karl Huysmans and modernist authors of the stream-of-consciousness technique. He takes

the position that the novel is primarily a caricature of the age of technology, and he considers several features from the antisocial behaviour of the protagonist to her unexpected affluence to be the effect of high technology. This opinion is in interesting contrast with the view presented by Kollár, who seems to think that the heroine's withdrawal into the world of technology is the result of the social disillusionment of the author as well as the protagonist. Klág's final conclusion about *Voyage* is that the anecdotal structure and the false travelogue impression created suggest that individual experience is much too limited for a person to make sense of the world in this day and age.

Ádám Czitrom emphasizes the blog-like nature of the narrative in *Voyage*, as well as the effect of cyberpunk it creates. He places *Voyage* in the context of postmodernism, with special attention to the blurred boundaries between high culture and popular culture, as well as the grotesque and even violent form of humour the author relies on. He considers the novel a network rather than a linear narrative and calls attention to features like Fischer's special use of repetition in support.

Péter Papolczy's paper is the first of four essays to discuss *The Collector Collector*. He offers a context for his analysis in terms of the various categories of narrators and how the features of these narrators define the narrative. For the sake of the argument the narrator is referred to as Mr. Bowl in this essay, although Papolczy is clear about the genderless nature of Fischer's ancient vessel. He considers the bowl to be a personification of the narrative tradition itself, both in terms of its long history and in terms of its ability to shift shape.

Miklós Mikecz continues to explore the reliability of the narrator and the narrative of this novel while also examining the strategies of plot construction. He claims that recycling and deconstructing the tradition of the inanimate narrator is presented in this novel together with the deconstruction of history and gender. Interestingly, this interpretation foregrounds the similarities

between Nikki and the bowl before discussing the emergence of the masculine authorial voice through the narration and concluding that the genderless narrator turns into a masculine one. While Mátyás Bíró will consider the bowl to be an intradiegetic narrator and will take this as a starting point for his comparative analysis, Mikecz concentrates on the subtle shifts of the position of the bowl in relation to the narrative situations and the narrated elements.

Mátyás Bíró's idea to compare Fischer's bowl with Keats's Grecian Urn is a textbook example of the way teaching English literature might work: previous studies about English Romantic poetry prepare the ground for contextualizing Fischer's urn, while familiarity with Aristotle's philosophy provides the theoretical framework within which the comparison of the two works is attempted.

Magdaléna Csóti explores the concept of original and copy through the rage and outrage the bowl in *The Collector Collector* seems to experience whenever meeting a Gorgon vase. She relies on Hungarian critics like Sándor Radnóti, who, in turn, relies on Walter Benjamin. Csóti considers the bowl to be a protagonist, as well as a narrator, and argues that we see a postmodernist equivalent of the picaro character ceramicking along the pages of the novel.

Ildikó Farkas discusses Fischer's latest novel to date, *Good to Be God*, considering it to be a work of postmodernism with magic realist features on the theme of the power of religion. She discusses the hero of the novel as a character of average skills, excellent intellect and extreme bad luck, who finally runs out of ways to avoid facing himself, and, paradoxically, finds success through his failures. This essay contrasts the promise of happiness offered by religion through a deferral of fulfilment with the promise of happiness offered by making a decision and following it through until one succeeds.

Anna László concentrates on the predominantly comic nature of Fischer's fiction. She characterises Fischer's humour based on cognitive humour theories and concludes that the dominant element of

the humorous effect of Fischer's work is non-predictability, a feature crucial to the way jokes are constructed. Based on altentive theories, her conclusion is that the comic effect is caused by surprising the reader through violating the Graded Informativeness Requirement or through the rejection of conversational implicatures.

Before launching this production, we would like to gratefully acknowledge a grant from the Student Government (HÖK) at the Faculty of Humanities at ELTE, as well as the help of all those who made the publication of this volume possible. Let me offer our gratitude to Tamás Sterbenz, secretary general to the National Association of Hungarian Basketball Players (MKOSZ), who saw the opportunity to support this volume as paying tribute to basketball players fictional as well as factual, while also honouring Tibor Fischer's parents, Margit Fekete, a former captain of the Hungarian national woman basketball team and György Fischer, amateur basketball player. We would like to thank Dr. Tamás Dezső, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, ELTE, Budapest, who supported the volume and the contact between the Faculty and MKOSZ, seeing the possibility for establishing ties between EL TE and MKOSZ as a chance to rekindle an interest in sports among students. Thanks are also due to Miklós Szalay, who created the graphic design; Beatrix Dávid, who ran all matters administrative; Miklós Mikecz, who helped the volume take shape; and Magdaléna Csóti, who did the layout work as well as taking on the responsibility of editorship.

We all wish Tibor Fischer many happy returns of the day, good health, happiness, success, and many more creative years of writing and teaching!

Judit Friedrich C.Sc.
Series editor

Szilvia Pálmai

Above the Fog

September 18, 2006

Gyuri flashed a winning smile at his reflection in the mirror. Yes, today will be a great day, he thought. In approximately one hour, he will be sitting next to a chirpy young lady named Kata he found courtesy of a very promising online dating website. To Gyuri, everything carried an air of authenticity that featured a horde of available women, eager for company, any company. Despite maintaining a very consistent diet of celibacy for several years, Gyuri was still unhindered by the generous helpings of romantic flops that had dominated his life up to this point. After exchanging a series of short yet cheerful emails the week before, Kata decided Gyuri was adequate for a quaint dinner at a restaurant near the Parliament building.

Gyuri crouched down on the floor of his bathroom, and cautiously emptied the bottom drawer of his cupboard, then consistently scattered its entire contents around his feet. With unceasing enthusiasm, he inspected all the unused, destitute-looking items that could potentially turn him from mediocre to slightly above average, in the hope of a post-dinner horizontal liaison. Ah yes, dental floss, he beamed. With a glint of delight in his eye, he grabbed the small instrument of hygiene, and delicately placed the thin string between his front teeth.

A distant ring from the living room interrupted Gyuri's ceremonial movements. He made his way effusively in the direction of the eerie tone, only to find his mobile phone on the counter of his table, blinking "new message" on its screen. He gave an eager

smile, assuming that it would be a message from Kata, confirming the time of their dinner. As he read the text, the expression on his face morphed from a confident smile to a deflated frown. "Dear Gyuri, can't make it today, demonstrations all over town. Will have to reschedule, Kata."

Feeling dejected, he took his usual place on the couch located behind the table, only to discover Elek sleeping in the most impaired posture imaginable next to him. His feet were twisted in a strange helix, with his hands reservedly tucked between his thighs. His head was casually hanging down towards the floor, with his mouth slightly open, revealing the residue of many hours of undisturbed sleep.

Unperturbed, Elek gave a whine of retort, signing to Gyuri to leave the couch. "How kind of you to wake me," he slowly added. Gyuri did not move. The sofa was by far the most pleasant and most visited piece of furniture in their apartment. It radiated the kind of warmth and compassion average males received from the opposite sex, and as for Gyuri, he took what he could get.

"I've been stood up. Again."

Elek gave an amused guffaw, but did not move. "What's the excuse this time? Something along the lines of a spontaneous revolution in the city centre, I imagine. That makes traffic unbearable." He subsequently rolled over, and eyed the floor, searching for his socks.

Gyuri reluctantly glanced at Elek, saying nothing.

"Gyuri, you are so naive," Elek added, as he gradually sat up, sock in hand. "But that's your charm. Doesn't get you women, but it sure gets you friends who you are an amusement to. So tell me, what kind of bull did this one pull on you?"

Gyuri quietly took in the moment of unbearable embarrassment that would follow this dialogue.

"Apparently, there are demonstrations all over town." Gyuri had spent the past two days with his nose pressed to his pillow, fixed to the bed due to a series of late nights in the office. If there were

demonstrations, there is a slight chance, menial, yet significant, that could imply the truthfulness of Kata's text. He disconnected from the political sphere 48 hours before. The same goes for Elek, who personally believes the less information he soaks in from the media, the better, thus he is not the person to count on for trivial facts such as a revolution.

As Elek's enamels parted, Gyuri was convinced, beyond doubt, that his confidence, self-admittedly never his forte, would be rapidly incinerated by a few carefully chosen, well constructed paternal words.

"You're a wanker," Elek explained, with such cautious intonation that every syllable stood proudly on its own feet.

A subsequent knock on the door interrupted Gyuri's dawdling apprehension of attaining yet another addition to his collection of romantic failures. Both Gyuri and Elek glanced over in the general direction of the polite, yet consistent slamming sound on the door. Gyuri decided to leave the fortifying comfort of the couch, and advance to the door. As he opened it, the owner of the brass knuckle was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a newspaper was lying on the ground, beside a few leaflets with handwritten block capitals on them. Gyuri could make out one of the sentences on the flyer, written in alarmingly large, bold letters: "You fucked up, now it's our time to screw you over!" Gyuri glared back at Elek, who now sat perched on the armrest of the couch, jovially lighting up a cigarette, taking no notice of the outside world.

"Elek, I believe you forgot to mention I should be fearing for my life. Would you care to explain whether we are getting evicted or unplugged tonight?" Gyuri fumed, as he flung the sheets at Elek with such inclemency that Elek himself felt it was appropriate to pay some attention to him.

Elek picked up the sheets and glued his eyes onto them, noting such carefully crafted, unmistakably clear messages as "Get the hell out of our country," "You're a goner," and his personal favourite upon reading, "We will get you in your sleep you good-for-nothing

son of a bitch." Elek had no recollection of pursuing an act that could inspire such conscientious lucubration, but in any case, he wouldn't allow it to interfere with his me-time with his cigarette.

Gyuri paced the room with a posthumous look on his face, then stopped at the window, and methodically searched the sky as if the answers would somehow materialize in front of him. Who had he pissed off in the previous days? He saw no reasonable explanation whatsoever.

Elek placed the leaflets on the table and noticed today's newspaper among them. He picked it up, read the headlines, scanned the first page, and shrieked with laughter.

"Well, I have some good news and some bad news. Despite the fact that every female specimen you have ever laid eyes upon has without a doubt gravitated towards another man, any man in fact, the aforementioned bird who blew you off was in fact right. Ferenc Gyurcsány, our Prime Minister, is in the doghouse. And there have been continuous protests since last night." At that moment, Gyuri scratched the plan of "being suicidally miserable for the next 3 weeks" off his to-do list.

"It says here," Elek continued, "that a rather humorous tape of his summer party conference at Balatonöszöd was leaked to the press yesterday. Apparently, Gyurcsány evaluated his previous and current years at office, and he concluded that the promises he and the socialists made were "a complete sham". With regard to the party's performance, as leader of the government of Hungary, he added "we fucked up" in further throes of passion. Mind you, I highly doubt that that came as a shock to anyone. And apparently, there are protests all over the city as we speak, demanding for Gyurcsány to step down. At the moment, half the population of Budapest is enjoying its favourite pass-time of complaining in front of the Television headquarters. I presume the leaflets are not essentially aimed at us. This would be the good news."

"That's the good news?" Gyuri inquired.

"Yes. The bad news is that, as you know, we live approximately two and a half cigarettes away from the Parliament building." Elek took a meaningful drag of his cigarette. "Yes, I see how that could pose a problem," Gyuri contemplated. Gazing back at Gyuri's questioning look, Elek slowly spoon-fed his main point to Gyuri as if he had the mental capacity of a newborn trout. "Have you ever tried sleeping through protests? Well, I'll let you know, it's a pain in the ass," he finished contemptuously.

At that approximate moment, a series of loud shatters, followed first by an astronomical blast, then an immediate hissing sound from behind them interrupted their conversation. Both Gyuri and Elek ducked under the couch, then slowly took a peek at the living room. The window was decorated by a tennis-ball-sized hole. A silhouette of misty smoke rose from the floor, which, on the count of three, exploded into a huge fog-like cloud. Gyuri quickly realized this was not Kata throwing pebbles at the window, eager to let him know of her romantic affections for him. The tear gas slowly settled itself into every corner of the apartment, as if it found its long lost home. Elek grunted, and slowly said "See what I'm talking about? Have you ever tried sleeping through this stuff? Gives you the worst freaking headache ever."

*

Due to the penetrating stench of the tear gas, Elek and Gyuri had to evacuate the apartment. In between persistent coughs and sneezes, they made their way out of the building, only to find themselves in the middle of a rampant demonstration. "I told you we should have moved downtown," Elek asserted, whilst blowing his nose with fervent intensity. "See, most people who have bad neighbours complain about the noise of their teenage kids having a house party, having their dog crap around your floor, or their insanely loud intercourse, but you don't see any of them

having to duck behind their couch to dive out of the way of tear gas bombs. We really should have seen this coming," Elek continued, wiping his eyes and coughing into a tissue simultaneously. "No wonder we got such a good deal on the flat," Gyuri added, with a small smile. He was slightly relieved though. Changing political winds and subsequent demonstrations he could handle, but there is a fine line between going through a rough patch with women and meeting your biological destiny of celibacy till death do us part. He was delighted to know he didn't get the elbow.

Deciding not to exert any more energy, Elek stayed behind.

As Gyuri made his way towards the Parliament building, the crowd was bulging through the streets like an elephant in a souvenir shop. No bus stop sign, car or fence was safe from the demonstrators. In between dodging rocks aimed at posters of Gyurcsány, Gyuri checked his phone for news of his other friends. Since he didn't get a signal, he was forced to discover the city of ululating protestors on his own. As he got to Szabadság tér, he noticed blocks of policemen trying fervently to stop the crowd from getting into the Television headquarters. Cameramen, journalists and hosts of average Joes hovered around the building close enough to see the action, yet far enough to make a swift exit if necessary. As far as revolts go, this one was quite conservative, but Gyuri had a sneaky feeling that it was merely the quiet before the storm. He gave his intuition the thumbs up when his retinas caught sight of two nearby cars having kerosene poured on them by a group of skinheads shrieking with laughter. Two members of the group threw lit matches on both vehicles, and in a matter of microseconds, they ran off, leaving Gyuri alone to witness the menacing sight of two Suzukis quietly burning by the pavement. Deciding that more pressing matters have to be dealt with, Gyuri made his way home, back to the apartment. He had forgotten to water the plants the day before.

July 16, 2006

Gyuri never really had a 'proper' job. He was one of those 'go with the flow' kind of people, hoping for a job, no matter how menial, just to make ends meet. It wasn't necessarily that he was incapable of attaining a mediocre 9 to 5 distraction, but it just came down to the fact that he was never bothered enough to commit to anything beyond a quickie.

That is mainly why it came as a shock to him to discover that it had been two months now that he had been working for a local paper where he was responsible for the obituaries. He was quite pleased with himself, considering he was initially planning to apply for a maintenance job, hoping for the least amount of responsibility humanly possible. The morning of the interview, Gyuri was 10 minutes late as he was caught traveling without a ticket on the number 4 tram. Rather than dodge the bullet and dash out of the door, Gyuri decided to be chivalrously honest, and proudly explained that he in fact did not have a ticket, nor would he ever have one. He was subsequently shoved out of the tram by a series of roughneck ticket inspectors, leaving Gyuri two stops away from the office where his interview would take place, with not a minute to spare. He decided it was best not to panic, so he casually walked the distance, whilst examining the attractive women making their way to their workplaces. They all looked quite sharp and professional, in contrast to Gyuri, who was sporting a rather cheap suit, considering that he wanted to look the part of maintenance staff convincingly. As he entered the building, he walked up the steps at a speed convenient enough for him to come up with a plausible excuse for being 20 minutes late. As he found himself in front of his boss-to-be, it quickly became clear that no explanation was needed as the man in question was either sufficiently inebriated, or he was simply retarded. That suited Gyuri just fine since it looked like no intellectual input was required on his part.

"Jolly good you could make it, sport. A tad bit after our agreed time, but no matter, I know how it is in today's fast-paced world. You young ones should really live it up, that's what I say. Life is to be lived, and what a life you must have! So, what brings you to our charming little paper? Tell me about yourself. Strengths, weaknesses, what are you enthusiastic about, what are your main goals in life, hobbies, anything really, go on!" the man beamed at Gyuri.

Gyuri was taken aback by the verbal diarrhoea of the man, whose ardour was as injudicious as that of an adolescent girl scout first stabbed by cupid's arrow.

Gyuri gave a weak smile and tried to figure out the best way to package "I excel in nothing." The man just kept staring at him, with an eerie look of happiness on his face.

"I honestly just came to get some money. I have no experience, no talents, nothing really to add to my name."

"Excellent, excellent, newcomers are what we like here at the Budapest Gazette. Fresh faces, yes, you'll do just fine here. You have the look of a man who wants to dash to glory no matter what obstacles you are faced with. You're hired. You start tomorrow, bright and early now, and you get your very own section of the paper! The obituaries! I know you can bring life to obituary. I see it in your eyes. See you tomorrow now!" the man finished, without blinking, or taking a breath for that matter, and quickly ushered Gyuri out of the room, without letting him get a word in. Gyuri wondered whether "I have so much potential, it's just masked by my below-average demeanour" was printed on his forehead. Despite Gyuri's incompetence in the correct application of grammar, or his slightly threadbare repertoire of vocabulary, his boss seemed quite delighted to have him on board. Gyuri thanked the heavens for human stupidity.

October 23, 2006

Gyuri had been washing his hair when it occured to him that it was the 50th anniversary of the Hungarian revolution of 1956. He added a bit of conditioner and let it soak in whilst he contemplated staying in or going out. It was around two o'clock, and the radio claimed that the opposing political party, Fidesz was having a peaceful commemoration at Astoria, whilst a few blocks away at Deák Ferenc tér, the demonstrators took a bus hostage, ignited a T-34 tank last used during the previous revolution 50 years back, and held a fire truck's hose captive to spray the hordes of policemen with.

Elek was still asleep, connected to the couch from head to toe, with no intention of extracting himself from the aforementioned position. Gyuri decided to leave his father in the comfort of his dreams and left the apartment, hoping that when he came back, he would find everything as it was.

In front of their building, he met Kata, whom he had rescheduled with the day before. They were quickly surrounded by belligerent protestors, who helpfully took both parties' minds off of first date jitters. Kata didn't comment on the current affairs, nor did Gyuri, although the topic would have provided enough conversational substance to get them through the day. Instead, they resolved the issue by handpicking their favourite cliché one-liner questions from "what part of Hungary are you from" to "what's your favourite colour." They got to the question of chocolate or vanilla just as they headed towards Bajcsy-Zsilinszky út, where the roughly 5000 protesters were greeted by the police with large amounts of paint and water sprayed at them from water cannons and tear gas for support as a suggestion to the protesters that they might want to go home.

One of the protestors threw a rock at a policeman, who cordially returned the favour moments after, causing the former to shriek in pain. As he turned around, Gyuri noticed it was Laci, who he hadn't seen for many years. He always wondered how he got on, but

maybe some questions are better left unanswered. Laci ran over to them, holding his right hand on his eye, with trickles of blood pouring down his cheek. "Gyuri, wow, it's been ages. Listen, I gotta get this looked at," Laci wheezed, "but it's great to see you! By the way –" he took a deep, long breath, and shouted "You put the DEMO in democracy!" With that, he fled the premises.

Kata frowned as the water cannons were closing in on them, to which Gyuri gave an agreeing nod, and suggested they go back home. After all, he had washed his hair earlier, no need for a small revolution to get in the way of hygiene. Gyuri was hoping to close the deal with Kata, and felt eternally grateful when his laboured laugh at his own joke caused similar sounds of joy to pass through her luscious lips. He felt happy. Suddenly a random skinhead ran past them, a gun in hand, and gave out a series of shots aimed at the poster of Gyurcsány located a few centimetres above Kata's head. Since the skinhead had had a few, his hand and finger coordination was off enough to send one of the bullets flying straight through Kata's right arm. She fell to the ground. Gyuri stood very still, and contemplated the best course of action – which, at that moment, seemed to be remaining single, for the sake of women everywhere. He eventually crouched down beside his date, and gave her a gentle poke. Nothing happened for a few seconds, then Kata flashed her eyes open. She first glanced at Gyuri, then at her arm, then back at Gyuri. "Um… I have an inkling that that was a rubber bullet," Kata stated. Then she stood up with grim determination, as if it were the most natural thing to do in the given situation. She checked her arm again, then showed it to Gyuri, who eyed it reluctantly. The afore-mentioned body part was indeed uninjured, Gyuri decided, and gently hugged her.

They concluded it was best to go back to the apartment, and keep a low profile for a while. Gyuri opened the door for Kata, and as they walked in, he noticed Elek sleeping in the exact same position as he was when his son had left. Yet, Gyuri knew. Something had changed. For one, the window needed fixing.

Zsófia Barlai

Hungary and Hungarians in Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog*

This essay is intended to analyse Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog* (1992) by elaborating the representation of Hungary and Hungarians. First, I would like to concentrate on the question of the work's authenticity and explore how the author manages to make the novel appear as a realistic account. Second, the characterisation process is planned to be analysed: how Fischer introduces and describes specifically Hungarian phenomena such as past events or certain psychological features of Hungarians. Finally, I would like to call the reader's attention to the similarities of some other works dealing with the same subject matter and relying on the presence of absurd humour in discussing this particular historical period in Hungary.

Authenticity and Structure

First, as a preliminary consideration, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the extra-textual fact of the writer's being of Hungarian origin. I would not have mentioned it (being aware of literary critical trends that claim the writer's identity should be kept separate from the interpretation of the work) but I strongly believe this cannot be ignored if we attempt to analyse the Hungarian aspect of *Under the Frog*. I believe the author's name – Tibor – definitely makes the reader aware of and sensitive to the fact that the novel was written by someone who actually belongs to the Hungarian nation. Moreover, this feeling of "in-group identity" and belonging is further emphasised by the fact that the protagonist has the same family name as the author. (At some point in the novel

the author lets the reader know that Tibor is also the given name of Pataki, Gyuri's best friend.) Even considering the bare facts, we can claim that the reader is to perceive a certain measure of authenticity simply through the names of the characters and the writer.

So I tend to believe that the author does play consciously upon the effect of belonging and takes up the role of the witness (or the son of the witness). Therefore, the reader naturally tends to place his or her trust in the narrator and is more likely to accept the plot as it is presented in the novel. The effect of the Hungarian-sounding name is observed and directly referred to by the author himself in an interview:

> I started writing about Hungary, and I was quite lucky that the first thing I had published was in the *Wall Street Journal* – a little op-ed piece about Hungary. And because of the fact that I had a Hungarian name ... [p]eople thought I knew more about Hungary than I did. (Birnbaum)

The deliberate attempt to "authorise" the novel and to give it a realistic tone, to represent it as "true", I believe, has a fundamental effect on the reader's perception.

This effect is further strengthened by the fact that the narrator throughout the novel does not prove unreliable. Unlike other Fischer novels, the plot can be perceived by the reader as a simple, casual, although highly sarcastic telling of a story by a witness. In this sense the novel can appear as part of the oldest storytelling tradition. The chapter titles give exact dates, which shows the writer's intention of giving the book a realistic, down-to-earth framework. Moreover, I believe the way *Under the Frog* is structured can be seen as typically Hungarian, as well. As the author himself points out in the novel, there is a wealth of "stories offered in the traditional Hungarian style of expanded self-history ... vocal autobiographies that all Hungarians seemed to be working on continually" (Fischer 219). Not only does Tibor Fischer tell of these biographies, but he also presents some in *Under the Frog*, such as the stories of the anti-Nazi fighter and ex-Recsk convict Miklós or

those of the unbelievably unfortunate Szócs. It has to be mentioned, though, that all stories in the novel are told unasked for, and are presented as recitals of calamities that had befallen the teller. Some similarities between these accounts and the novel can be discovered: e. g., the *in medias res* structure, the casual tone of expression or even the need to be entertaining while complaining about the unlucky circumstances the protagonist finds himself in.

Characterising Hungary

Fischer gives the readers not only the exact dates and the illusion of a realistic account but a well-defined location, too. *Under the Frog* might be read as a guide to the Hungarian nation in the 50s or even earlier. Most of the methods Fischer uses are direct, e. g., explanations and descriptions of or explicit remarks on some characteristic feature of Hungary. Some methods of characterisation are indirect, and therefore they might be more powerful in conveying a general, vague impression about the country and its inhabitants.

Hungarian Cultural Heritage

The writer of *Under the Frog* takes meticulous care not to refer to most parts of Hungarian history without explaining its significance briefly to the reader. It can be especially strongly felt in the passages introducing the lives and achievements of famous Hungarian poets (such as Petőfi, Tompa, Ady or even Attila József). Similarly, the reader can gather information about Zrínyi, the famous 17th-century military leader, General Bem or the unfortunate habit of Hungarian armies getting wiped out all the time. In addition, contemporary events are retold by the author, e. g., the hardships of World War II, the Hungarian Nazi past, or the corrupted elections in 1945 and 1947 which eventually led to the communists' takeover.

An exact history of the Rákosi era is represented in the novel, starting with the propaganda-contaminated life of the individual.

Gyuri, being a "class alien", experiences the difficulties a police state can cause and the oppression staining everyone's public and private life. Even the famous "bell-shock" (csengőfrász) and the legendary black cars of the ÁVO are mentioned in the course of events. The reader is introduced to the informer-problem when young Pataki is forced to spy on his fellow scouts. Through the incident in Hálás (sic!) the processes and methods of collectivisation and the persecution of the church become known. Gyuri's work experience gives us insight to the microcosm of the socialised, state-directed industry: Stakhanovism, propaganda, the uselessness of production plans and the typically socialist phenomenon of employed unemployment. Finally, a marginal although completely accurate history of the 1956 revolution is given to the reader.

Just to be fair, it should be mentioned that in addition to all this historical-cultural information, some positive features of the Hungarian people appear in the novel, too. Although sad events are vastly over-represented in the book, the reader learns about the famous footballer Ferenc Puskás and the nuclear physicist Ede Teller. I assume they are quite well-known for a non-Hungarian reader, so I believe the remarks about such emblematic figures somehow connect to the commonplace images of the reader about Hungarians – or at least, those images Hungarians tend to project about themselves (such as that of a nation with great inventiveness). So I believe when Fischer tries to show an image of Hungarians, he extends factual information (especially negative information) and uses the assumed, already existing commonplace details the reader might know, in order to create a more intricate portrait.

To sum up, *Under the Frog* proves to be very informative about the Hungarian past and cultural heritage, which, I believe, is necessary if a true-to-life account of the Rákosi era is being aimed at. Moreover, the narrator's highly sarcastic tone brilliantly balances the information load and therefore provides the reader with the necessary background information while it manages to stay highly entertaining at the same time.

All these pieces of explicit information help the reader to grasp the main message underlying and connecting all the historic events retold by Fischer: recent Hungarian history is mostly about being without any choice. As Gyuri contemplates:

> It would be so nice to have a real choice, fumed Gyuri. It was like Hungary being between Germany and the Soviet Union. What sort of choice was that? Which language would you like your firing squad to speak? … If you're falling off a cliff, the quality of the brains that are going to get dashed doesn't hugely count. (67)[1]

Hungarian People Characterised

Hungarian people are characterised similarly to the above described method. There are explicit and implicit references that are represented as true for Hungarians as a group. According to the general remarks, Hungarian people live in chaotic historical circumstances, constantly fighting with all the odds against them. The best representative of this systematic misfortune is Szócs – "an orphan, he had been shipwrecked as a cabin-boy, lost the use of one eye from an infection, lost his toes from frostbite in a Russian prisoner of war camp, lost both of his children in the great dysentery epidemic in 1919" (98). Similarly unlucky is Miklós – who has been one of the

1 The problem of Hungary's not having any choice to influence its destiny since the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867, due to external circumstances, such as the Habsburg Monarchy or the Soviet Union, has been a main historiographical topic (the Hungarin technical term is "kényszerpálya-elmélet"). The problem is discussed in almost any general history book written about 19th- or 20th-century Hungarian history. Recent historio-social research applies this way of thinking to the Horthy era, saying that following the Paris Peace Conference Hungary had been left with no choice other than to join an ally who promised revision - eventually even Hitler's Germany. See: Zeidler, Miklós. *A revíziós gondolat*. [*The Idea of Revision*] Budapest: Osiris, 2001.

countless victims of the regime – and Gyuri's father, who has been classified as bourgeois because he ran a small grocer's shop. Strongly in connection with the image of "chronic Hungarian misfortune", Hungarians are shown as people who love complaining all the time and at the same time are likely to look gloomily into the future – moreover, to be inclined to commit suicide. As the author puts it:

> One had to respect suicide as the national pastime, as the vice Hungarian. … For centuries, Hungarians of quality and quantity, who hadn't managed to be part of Hungarian armies that got wiped out, had been blowing their brains out or uncaging their souls in other ways. Yes, a few idle minutes, some melancholy music and a Hungarian would be trying to unplug himself. (81)

A similarly passive attitude resurfaces every now and then in the recurring line: "This can't go on much longer" (197) – still, nothing is ever done about it. As Fischer notes, complaining is a national Hungarian pastime.

This gloomy, sarcastic image of the arch-Hungarian is refined by the introduction of various different characters. Gyuri and Pataki both represent a possible way of living in the communist state. Pataki, the cheeky opportunist is a down-to-earth, subversive character who falls victim to the oppressive system – still, he manages to leave Hungary without any apparent feeling of frustration. He represents the lively survivor, the happy-go-lucky side of the dual Hungarian nature. A few characters similar to him can be discovered in the novel: Tamás, Gyuri's incredibly strong colleague, Gyuri's brother István, or Kurucz, who is "a close personal friend of surviving" (239).

Gyuri is quite different from his friends and more prone to behaving in the way Fischer's explicit remarks on the general Hungarian attitude describe. He carefully preserves the "acute sense of accumulated injustice and aggrievedness that he had been so carefully working on" (99). Gyuri is unsatisfied and unhappy, and he takes a masochistic pleasure in recounting his unfortunate moments in life. He is the one suffering from claustrophobia stem-

ming from the iron curtain and the feeling of being trapped in a social structure that does not allow for "class aliens" to live in peace. As Gyuri remarks in his prison cell: "The main difference between prison and being out in Hungary ... was that in prison there was less room." (129)

While Gyuri feels unable to cope with the circumstances, he stays unmotivated and incapable of changing his life. His journey to Szeged can be seen as a representative example: when his travel is ruined by a man snoring in his compartment, nothing fundamental is done so as to stop him or leave the compartment, thus Gyuri endures him up until Szeged, finally taking a petty revenge on his fellow passenger. (157)

So Gyuri, as many Hungarians are in the novel, is passive, a sufferer of the circumstances. Even when he is a freedom fighter, he is reluctant, depressed and pessimistic. In comparison with him, there are active Hungarians depicted: the initiators (or heroic ex-victims) who act because they believe in ideals – they suffer and die while the opportunists, who do not take anything seriously, survive (such as Tamás or Pataki – Tamás being the one, I would like to point out, who has a collection of Iron Crosses *and* Orders of Lenin).

The duality of these two kinds of people – victims and oppressors – is very characteristic of the societies in totalitarian dictatorships, where the oppressors who contribute actively to the system are very similar to those victims who contribute to the stability of the system by not doing anything. In a situation like that, victims are the only group to which people with a moral backbone can belong – even if being a victim distorts integrity by definition and is a dead end (even literally) in itself – a common historical experience in the Central European region.

Language

Although the Hungarian language is not directly presented in the novel, Fischer manages to convey the typical expressions and ver-

bal traditions that are very characteristic of the age. The reader can learn some of the phraseology of the communist propaganda (such as the FRIENDS OF TRUMAN board in the Ganz factory) as well as the inscriptions on Gyuri's cell at 60 Andrássy út. Moreover, a small collection of authentic contemporary political jokes can be compiled after a thorough reading.

Even at the syntactic level *Under the Frog* is written with a very delicate and interesting mixture of English and Hungarian. The title itself suggests the technique Fischer applies throughout the book, namely, using Hungarian phrases and expressions translated into English word for word. Being "under the frog's arse" in Hungarian means to feel very low. Similarly, the reader can learn the Hungarian expression "there isn't room for two bagpipe players in the same inn", meaning that two persons cannot be in charge for the same thing. Even Hungarian swearwords such as "God's dick" appear. Differently from the above analyzed characterization devices, there cannot be found any attempt by the author to explain any of the odd-sounding English-Hungarian language chunks in the text. Consequently, even a skilled English reader will not be able to understand and appreciate the half-hidden syntactic layer of humour.

The Absurd as World-View

The plotline, the characters and the situations that follow each other can be characterised according to the terms of absurd humour, which is based on irrationality and nonsense. The absurdity of the story, which is further emphasised by the absurdity of the language and the situational comedy, in contrast with the earlier analysed impression of "reliability" or the image of "telling a true story of my father's life" – prove to be among the best tools to describe the distorted relationship of reality and truth which was so characteristic of the Rákosi era.

To begin with, I find it very important to point out the fact that to represent the Stalinist period of Hungarian history (1947–1953)

in terms of the absurd has a long tradition in Hungary. One of the most famous examples of this tendency is Péter Bacsó's *The Witness* (1969), a film that shows an anti-Nazi freedom-fighter's struggle in the propaganda-factory of the Rákosi-led communist state. The main character's simplicity and innocence contrast with the absurd circumstances he is placed in. The work has achieved the status of a cult-film in Hungary, which shows how popular it is to retell these years of Hungarian history in absurd tones (see also Bikácsy). Similar to the aforementioned example is the autobiography of the famous Hungarian poet, György Faludy's *My Happy Days in Hell* (1987). Although Faludy does not hit a directly absurd tone in his book, he also uses irony and the devices of absurd humour to tell about his time in the labour camp in Recsk. These works show that the absurd has for a long time been the means of artistic self-expression in Hungary regarding the time of the Rákosi oppression.

To represent the 1950s as absurd can be put down to the historical changes in Central Europe in the 20th century:

> At the time when the first absurd plays were being written and staged in Western Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, people in the East European countries suddenly found themselves thrown into a world where absurdity was an integral part of everyday living. Suddenly, you did not need to be an abstract thinker in order to be able to reflect upon absurdity: the experience of absurdity became part and parcel of everybody's existence.… The Soviet-type system managed to bring the experience of what was initially a matter of concern for only a small number of sensitive individuals in the West to whole nations in the East. … Official East-European practices, based on a contempt for the fundamental existential questions and on a primitive and arrogant faith in the power of a simplified idea i. e., of Marxism, have created a reality which makes absurdity a primary and deeply-felt, intrinsic experience for anybody who comes in contact with that reality. (Culík 5)

Fischer's novel can be seen as an ample example of showing

how people expressed themselves, how they responded to the challenges of the "dull dictatorship", as Fischer put it, and how they survived in spite of wars and oppression. The author describes many absurd situations. One of the most characteristic is when four prostitutes arrive at the Ganz factory. The girls are offered jobs to save them from "the lustful sweatshops of hypocritical bourgeois depravity" (Fischer 4). The employment of the four girls is made fun of by placing it in a highly propagandistic context. The girls are welcomed by the foreman, who addresses a formal speech to them on this occasion. The final outcome of the encounter is that the girls continue their trade inside the factory and Gyuri draws his general conclusions from this impractical, ideologically mingled case as follows: "That really was the heart of Communism, Gyuri decided: it made it harder for everyone to do what they do." (5)

Irony and absurd humour, by definition, distance the self from the situation described, which might have served as a survival tool in 20th-century catastrophes. This need to distance the individual from the chances of history or destiny is directly expressed by Gyuri's teacher: "Fischer, Fischer, this is deplorable. You can't let a little war interfere with serious scholarship. You know our history. As a Hungarian you should be prepared for the odd cataclysm." (29) Still, this need for detachment becomes out-of-the-question in a totalitarian dictatorship – therefore the Hungarian struggle against history becomes dramatically impossible and leaves the protagonist of Fischer's book with no choice but to leave for a freer part of the world.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Fischer uses an interesting mixture of realistic and unrealistic motifs in *Under the Frog* to express the absurdity and cruelty of the circumstances Hungarian people had to endure. Through applying a highly sarcastic tone he seemingly does not take anything seriously – the tragedies and difficulties receive a true

but not depressing presentation. The author characterises Hungarians by providing enough background information in many ways, which enable the reader to see the importance of the events. Readers are not only invited into the faithfully described external context of the Hungarian Communist era but are given an insight into the controversial states of the human mind in general. Therefore, the marginal story of the ups and downs (mainly downs) of a young Hungarian basketball player during the Rákosi era becomes the representation of a universal Eastern European experience as well as a highly entertaining, thought-provoking read.

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KLAUDIA SZABÓ

Losing Ground

Distance and Connections between Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog* and Ferenc Molnár's *The Paul Street Boys*

Two novels, two different eras and two societies of Budapest boys. The heroic struggle of Ferenc Molnár's juvenile classic *The Paul Street Boys* and Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog* portraying a passive and disillusioned Hungary do not seem to have much in common at first glance. Because of their age the primary school children of Paul Street and the young men on the threshold of adulthood in Fischer's novel differ in general concerns and interests, but more importantly, there are two wholly different social realities in the background of these male societies. The *belle époque* of 1889 Hungary when the action of *The Paul Street Boys* takes place and Hungary in the decade leading up to the revolution of 1956 represent two opposing moral stances and exert a different impact on the society of boys living in them. The Paul Street boys' society is a self-contained association that aims to secure childhood freedom, while the society of Fischer's young men is formed as the direct product of their historical background, emerging and functioning against it. Both novels revolve around a decisive battle, but the scope and scale of the fights related by the two novels are substantially different: the children of Paul Street struggle for a little piece of land in the heart of the capital city while in *Under the Frog* fight begins for the entire country; still, these lands of different scopes will represent the same perceived value. The chief difference is in the attitudes of the Paul Street boys and the players of the Locomotive basketball team towards these different kinds of homelands, and in the background of these attitudes we can again discover the legacy of history. Fischer's *Under the Frog* and Molnár's *The Paul Street Boys* comprise absolute counterpoints and their

comparison renders discernible the socio-historic tableaux they draw.

Therefore, in this paper I will contrast a number of themes and elements which offer points of connection yet distance the two novels. It is these very points which help to fathom the disparity between the world-views of the two narratives. I will compare first the structure of the male societies and the hierarchy established in them with special attention to the group members whose perspectives prevail in the narration. I will analyse the social and historical background of the events described in the two novels to show the influence they effect on the nature and structure of the societies and even more so on the personalities of the respective protagonists. What the *grund* is in each of the novels and what it means for the characters can also be defined with respect to this external reality. The figures of the traitor and the victim appear in both novels, but their representations, functions and relations to the rest of the group encode the difference of the value systems induced by the external situation. Thus, these motifs will be subjects of comparison, along with the narrative voices in the two novels, which also tell about the two works' difference in world-view. The connections of the two novels along the above themes and motifs mark a historical distance between them which, though not very long in actual years – only half a century – is still insurmountable. While a picture of pervasive loss takes shape in both works, the naive idealism and enthusiasm of Ferenc Molnár's children and the disillusioned scepticism of Fischer's protagonists encode two irreconcilable world-views, separated by the events of the first half of the twentieth century, the experience of two world wars, and that of the oppression under the Communist regime, described in Fischer's narrative.

It should be noted at the start that both novels exist in a double-language space. Molnár's *The Paul Street Boys* (1907) is a classic piece of the Hungarian literary canon of children's literature and has been a set text in primary schools for several decades. Thanks to the novel, Üllői út, a street in Budapest's Ferencváros is now a cultic area in Hungarian cultural consciousness. Molnár's novel became an

international juvenile classic and was translated into several languages, among others to English by Louis Rittenberg in 1927. What adds a twist to the issue is that *Under the Frog* was also translated "back" to Hungarian in 1994 by István Bart, with the title *A béka segge alatt*, giving back its original idiomatic value. As it were, the final product in both cases is a cultural translation, yet in Fischer's case we may even talk about multiple cultural displacements, which make the novel interesting for both British and Hungarian audiences.

The line of connections can be continued with the proposition that the children of Ferenc Molnár's *The Paul Street Boys* and the young adults of the Locomotive basketball team in Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog* both form male societies which, though different in structure, have the same fundamental goal: to secure a kind of personal freedom by means of establishing rules and conditions within these private societies which are different from those of the outer society that limits them in one way or another. In consequence, these groups operate more or less in antagonism to the outer society. "The famous association of Paul Street Boys" (26)[1], as Molnár terms the little group of his young-adolescent protagonists, are classmates and friends who play together after school at the same vacant lot in Budapest. For the Paul Street Boys as children around fourteen the confinements of society appear in the institution of schooling, the classroom, and "professorial discipline" (9). The energies of these young children are controlled by the rigour of teachers who stop them in their running down the stairs and also by the time schedule of the school which glues them to their desks without concession until the last minutes of class. Molnár's introductory passages of chapter one contain a straightforward identification of the school as prison: "Like so many released prisoners, they reeled about at contact with so much fresh air and sunshine" (10). The boys would rather be outdoors, in the open, and the

1 When only page numbers are indicated quotes are taken from the primary source being discussed.

school building and school time appear as a closed and detaining system in opposition to the need for freedom of movement. The space where this freedom can manifest itself is the ground or *grund*, as they call it due to the prevailing German influence of the time: a vacant lot amidst the buildings of the ninth district of the capital city. The fact that Ferenc Molnár chose Hungary's *belle époque* as background for his novel explains why this plain lot is so precious for the children. This golden age, which lasted from the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 up to the First World War, was a period of prolonged peace and prosperity, when Budapest acquired its present-day big-city image. Urbanisation was only one upshot of the economic boom of the age which, through a process of technological development, caused radical changes in people's everyday lives and more thorough changes in their thinking and general outlook. Péter Hanák's passages in *The World of Yesterday,* a photo album of Hungarian cities at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, summarise the general atmosphere of the age as follows:

> The glamour of the *belle époque*, the prosperity and sense of safety of the prolonged period of peace was taken for granted, actual reality, so to say, an evidence of life, which was supported by the miracles of rationality that science and technology provided continuously. The man of the turn of the century still considered the course of development linear, civilization a bliss and the improvement of general life standards unbroken. And if he was Hungarian, the Millenium provided domestic evidence of development and ground for optimism. (6)[2]

The slogans of the period were *urbanité* and *civilité*, which marked an utopistic vision of a well-functioning, prospering community led by the urban middle-classes. István Nemeskürty's interpretation of The Paul Street Boys in a 1994 encyclopaedic series on Hungary is very much in keeping with this vision. It asserts that "*The Paul*

2 Translations are mine, K. Sz. whenever not indicated otherwise. Original Hungarian passages are listed in Appendix A.

Street Boys is the dream of the urban youth, growing up to be the future's citizens, about democracy, a republic and a society of equals." Sándor Márai's *Garren* family trilogy is a memento of this society, which in his writings is already in decay.[3]

It is also reported by Hanák that "[i]n the dualist era the populace of Budapest grew threefold" (Hanák 6) and Molnár's narration reveals that the children seem utterly lost in the multitude of this newborn metropolis: "They revelled in the din and buoyancy and vividness of the city – things which to them meant merely a conglomeration of cabs, horse trams, streets and shops, through which they had to find their ways home" (10-11). As children whose experience of the world is yet very limited they cannot exploit the advantages a capital city offers. An open space, like the American prairie as the children envision the *grund* in their Indian games (24), would be a more suitable living place for them than the throbbing metropolis of Budapest at the turn of the century. This is why the *grund* becomes so important for Molnár's children: it will be their own prairie that "spells freedom and boundlessness" (22) among the three-storey houses of the expanding city. It is a place where the freedom of imagination combines with the freedom in space, the freedom to move about and run around and play freely: "it was the city, the forest, the rocky mountainous region; that which [they] wanted it to be on any given day" (24). The association of the Paul Street boys will therefore centre round this precious lot and the will to keep it for themselves. This way the *grund*, when it comes to defending it, will be equated to a national homeland in the boys' minds. While the social reality of the age, which triggers the boom of Budapest and consequently the narrowing down of free space, is the actual cause of the boys' plight, it is also the optimism and

3 "This is the Hungarian middle-class whose way of life I was born into, observed, came to know and scrutinised in all its features to the very roots, and now I see the whole disintegrating. Perhaps this is my life's, my writing's sole duty: to delineate the course of this disintegration" (Márai qtd. by Tezla 6).

prosperity of the epoch that enables them to sustain such positively patriotic devotion that characterises their attitude to the *grund*:

> In their eyes was reflected the ardent love they felt for this strip of land and the determination to fight for it, if need be. It was a form of patriotism. Their "Hurrah for the *grund*!" sounded as if they meant to cry "Long live our Fatherland." All eyes were radiant, hearts overflowing with emotion. (37)

While the function of the boys' association is antagonistic to the institution of schooling, the hierarchy which they set up in their free time imitates the institutional rigour experienced at school. At the *grund* they organise themselves as a formal army with well-defined ranks and rules and generally strict "[m]ilitary discipline" (25). The rank order is captain, first lieutenant, second lieutenant and all these leaders "[are] in command over a solitary private," that is, "blond little Nemecsek" (24). This structure does not correspond too much to the democratic "society of equals", an idea suggested by István Nemeskürty, even less so as the boys will choose a leader possessing full power in the person of János Boka as captain. Boka is elected, however, through a democratic procedure and his appointment is based on a meritocratic principle. It is his relative maturity compared to the other boys that qualifies him as leader of the group. Boka is also the object of a cult of personality, which is nourished voluntarily by the boys and the main pillars of which are his moral firmness, intelligence, thoughtfulness and general peace of mind, exemplified by the following passages respectively:

> Boka was fair. This self-punishment was a splendid example of manliness such as one rarely hears of even in the course of Latin lessons, though [they] deal abundantly with Roman character. (31)
>
> It filled them with courage to know that their chief was such a nimble-witted fellow. (53)
>
> Boka earnestly and quietly, as was his wont, held forth on a topic of mutual interest… He rarely said anything foolish. (14-15)

He alone among the boys is on the verge of turning into a man, as Molnár's characterisation reveals: "He was fourteen years old, with hardly any trace of manliness in his face. But he gained in years the moment he opened his lips. His voice was resonant, gentle and persuasive" (14-15). Therefore, he will also be regarded as a role model, a sort of "father figure" by his mates, who clearly have a need to be led, judging by their willingness to transfer the right of the last word gladly on Boka, like on the occasion when it is reported to him that some of the redshirts had taken away Nemecsek's marbles: "Boka stood still, thinking hard. Everyone was watching him. All of them were anxious to know what Boka would have to say about these grievances" (19).

However, tension will emerge within the group as Geréb's more spontaneous leadership style and "much too temperamental, too devil-may-care" (41) personality arises in opposition to Boka's "placid, earnest and sensible nature" and Geréb ceases to put up with Boka "pull[ing] face at every suggestion" (17) for action. The conflict of these two differing leadership styles evokes the dispute between Kossuth and Széchenyi, the ideas of national radicalism and considerate progression from the middle of the nineteenth century. Geréb's and Boka's relationship is described by Molnár as lion and tamer's (13). Although Boka is indeed successful in restraining Geréb for a while, their collision begets jealousy, and Geréb's recognition that "so long as Boka remain[s] in the club, he himself ha[s] only a slight chance to advance" (41) will finally lead to a break and to Geréb's treason. Despite the fact that Nemecsek's handling and his lonesome place at the bottom of the hierarchy as opposed to Boka, the omnipotent leader, point to an undemocratic order, which in addition seems to reproduce the power relations of the school, we have to see that this order relies on common consensus. Nemecsek "blissfully heed[s] every command" for "[t]here are boys who actually delight in crisply obeying orders. Yet most boys love to issue orders. Such is human nature" (25), and Boka procures the leading position because of his merits, and his subor-

dinates even take pride in his distinction. Also, once Nemecsek "[is] out to merit promotion" (40) and executes his sacrifice to the *grund*, his achievements are acknowledged quickly and he rises to be the new captain of the *grund*. The military arrangement at the *grund* is possible because it is the children's own order, an arrangement of their own choice which is based on a consensus of their own. It is this consensus which will be upset by Geréb.

Within the larger association of the Paul Street boys operates the smaller association of the Putty Club, the aim of which is to keep a piece of putty soft by chewing it and doing this core activity in the framework of extensive bureaucracy. One may easily regard the club as a caricature of full-grown parliamentary democracy with all its administrative bodies, while at the same time the club operates against such an extensively regulated, established system. The representatives of this system in the boys' lives are the school and Professor Rácz, who "explicitly … forbade the forming of any kind of a club" (70) and calls the members of the club in his office after lessons. The ensuing scene evokes Gyuri's and Pataki's summons at the AVO headquarters in Fischer's narrative; even more so because as soon as the boys are dismissed by Rácz with the words: "Don't ever dare to form a club again! Clear out now and go home!" (78), instead of going home the boys reform the club on the new piece of putty Nemecsek has scratched out from the tutor's window during their questioning and set off for the *grund* as if nothing had happened. Similarly, neither Pataki nor Gyuri will be intimidated enough by the visit to the AVO to refrain from subsequent pranks.

We should point out that age difference between the two groups – children on the one hand, young men on the other – will fundamentally define many of the features of the emerging groups, like their hierarchical structure, the functions and aims the groups may take up, the scope and scale of their activities and also the extent to which the current affairs or the politics of the outside world can penetrate their society. Molnár's children passively suffer the consequences of Budapest's rise but are unaware of the broader

ecnomical process that is responsible for the changes. Fischer's young adults, on the other hand, face the political situation daily and are very much aware of the prospects they have for the future. Although they are quasi-adult individuals on the threshold of financial independence, they will be passive sufferers just like Molnár's children because they are confined to this role by the political system.

Because they have a stronger demand for personal independence, a strict hierarchy as that of the Paul Street boys would be unimaginable for Fischer's characters. What holds them together is the official body of the Locomotive basketball team, consisting of closer friends and distant acquaintances who do not necessarily meet outside the team. The boys within this official body constitute a loose, non-canonised hierarchy with unwritten rules and no overt rank order. Unofficial positions are ascribed and gained, however, through achievements in accord with peer interests such as sexual conquest, sports success, peculiar humour or a daredevil attitude. Gyuri Fischer does not qualify as outstanding in any of these categories, thus his perspective will predominate most of the narrative as that of a loveable anti-hero. His friendship with Pataki constitutes the closest interpersonal bond within the Locomotive group, slightly similar to the Boka-Nemecsek association, since, as recurring references in the narration reveal (such as "Pataki had become a mortal" (145)), Pataki fulfils a sort of pseudo-leader role in the group, especially for Gyuri. His distinguished position finds motivation in the group's more fundamental ambitions: he is the most daring among the boys, thus he is the one to best display that anarchic attitude towards the outer order which is the most powerful cohesive force within the group. The main source of comradeship between group members, who are otherwise leading their lives along separate lines, is a shared historical condition: the ineradicable Communist regime and the all-pervasive state control, which denies them their much wanted personal independence and prevents them from having the same opportunities in life as men of

their age in other countries generally do. Extensive state patronage hinders one in shaping his own fate, paralyses the individual and leads on the whole into general boredom, disinterestedness and impotence. It also corrupts in that it prevents shouldering responsibility for one's own deeds. The general situation is summarised by Gyuri:

> That was the sort of organic stagnation, displayed stasis, obedience under clear glass that they would like from people, stacked in their homes, products that didn't require attention, that wouldn't be troubled by the languors of the system of distribution, that would just exist docilely on the shelf until needed (145).

State limitation appears on one level in the boys' confinement in free movement, similarly to the Paul Street boys. Fischer's novel starts with Gyuri's meditations: "It was true that at the age of twenty-five he had never left the country, that he had never got more than three days' march from his birthplace, no more than a day and a half of horse and carting or one long afternoon's locomoting" (1). Interestingly, the boys' school years appear in Fischer's novel too, with the school occurring as an allusion to the wider political order. However, contrasted to the confinements of the outer reality, the school environment of the *The Paul Street Boys* is presented as an object of nostalgia. The cult of personality as another feature of state presence is also displayed in Fischer's novel, pointing already to the deteriorating effects of totalitarian systems on the individual. Gyuri's wish to go anywhere outside Hungary where "you wouldn't have to look at pictures of Rákosi or whoever had superbriganded their way to the top lately" (3) and his other reference that Party leaders are "all turds off the same production line" (198) indicate an incapability to cultivate a positive picture of political leaders generally and a complete loss of trust in them. This also explains why the Locomotive team would not have such an omnipotent leader in their group as Boka is in the Paul Street boys' association.

Unlike for Molnár's children, confinement in space is not the main discomfort for Fischer's young men, in spite of Gyuri's comment that "[a]part from the prevailing political inclemency and the ubiquitous shittiness of life, the simple absurdity of never having voyaged more than two hundred kilometres from the spot where he had bailed out of the womb rankled" (4). It is the general stasis of Communist Hungary which is the real source of their annoyance and it is this setting to which the Locomotive boys' group reacts with rebellious behaviour. They invent "inside" habits, like the Putty Club, only they do this in a more grown-up fashion: their habit of travelling naked to away matches is an act to counterbalance the shortness of the allowed radius of travelling by doing something uncontrolled in the meantime. This is clearly shown by Gyuri's self-consolatory reflection on their nudism: "On the other hand, Gyuri mused, how many people could say they had travelled the length and breadth of Hungary naked?" (1). As it was customary with the nominally amateur sportsmen during the Communist and Socialist era, the official position of being a member of the Locomotive basketball team entails some allowances from confinements for Fischer's boys and more tolerance for minor transgressions: Róka, although not Gyuri, can travel to Rumania in spite of being class-x; they get away with verbal notices from the AVO for their pranks; and Pataki, in one way or another, survives running past the AVO headquarters stark naked. These anecdotal episodes, which Fischer builds into his narrative, seem to confirm Gyuri's statement: "That really was the heart of Communism …: it made it harder for everyone to do what they do" (5).

The difference between the two novels' disparate social backgrounds in terms of their impact on the individual is very well reflected by Gyuri's and Boka's ambitions and morals. Gyuri's humble fantasy of being a streetsweeper just to be outside Hungary and left alone by political ideology is opposed to Boka's musings on a future of fame and social commitment:

> Being a streetsweeper would be quite agreeable, Gyuri reflected. You'd be out in the open, doing healthy work, seeing things. It was the very humility of this fantasy, its frugality that gave the greatest pleasure, since Gyuri hoped this could facilitate its coming to pass. ... How could anyone refuse a request to be a streetsweeper? Just pull me out. (Fischer 3-4)
>
> What would become of him? What sort of career was he destined for? Would he be a soldier, a real soldier, commanding uniformed troops on some distant battle field – fighting not for a piece of land, such as this *grund* of theirs, but for that vast sweet territory known as the Fatherland? Or would he turn out to be a physician, daily waging war, grimly serious war, against human affliction? (Molnár 116)

Boka is ambitious and considers professions which presuppose a strong sense of community, while Gyuri has already given up on such ideals and thinks only of himself. Gyuri's case may exemplify how the ideas of collectivism and social commitment forced by party propaganda were undermined by the one-party system itself: as people grew more and more indifferent they also grew more and more individualistic.

The same extremes are present in the intensity of the two boys' moral urges: "In other words, Boka seemed to be a sensible lad destined – if not to achieve great things – to take his place in life as a man of honour and integrity." (Molnár 15) "[Gyuri] wasn't at all pleased at being right. Being right, he discovered, doesn't necessarily do any more good than being wrong.… Thanks to the Red Army, he was going to explode, but he didn't want to fight." (Fischer 239)

The damage to the attitudes of the Locomotive boys caused by their socio-cultural background generates the paradox that while for the Paul Street boys a stretch of empty land can substitute a national homeland, for the Locomotive team an entire country can-

not live up to this role. However, the *grund*'s capacity to act as a country is also justified by the Paul Street boys' young age: they are school children who conduct their daily trajectories along the home-school-*grund* triangle, who move within a very limited living space and whose knowledge of the world is yet scanty. Also, due to their youth the darker aspects of contemporary life which in fact do linger around cannot enter their consciousness. Hanák writes that the great majority of contemporaries were blinded by the faith in development, prosperity and feeling of security, and "[t]he miraculous revival of Budapest, its royal palace, parliament building and villa rows hid from sight the pilasters, the poverty of flats along circular corridors, the barracks of the suburbia and the humble barn-yards of agricultural areas" (6). The only point where this outer reality leaks in is the poverty of the Nemecsek family, who live in a side street of Budapest in a small flat on the ground floor. The tailor father has to work during the agony of his son and the skinny build of all family members might very well be symptomatic of malnutrition. However, this sociographic element is secondary to Nemecsek's plight and death, for the actual story of Molnár's novel relates a group of young boys' first encounter with major loss in life which in turn allows them an insight into the harsh realities of adult age. The experience is conveyed through János Boka's consciousness; and in this sense *The Paul Street Boys* is a coming-of-age novel, in which Boka, already in an intermediary state between childhood and manhood, proceeds from innocence to experience. The message is there from the very beginning in numerous images which have no immediate function in the narrative, but they all prefigure the coming tragedy. These images are typically manifested in the atmosphere of the school: in the class "Deep silence ensue[s]. A deathly silence" (8); in Professor Rácz's office there is "a funeral atmosphere" (70) and most importantly, "In one of the nooks there [is] also a modest but dignified specimen of [the professor's] arch secret, the terror of terrors – a yellowed skeleton" (10). Nemecsek's tragedy bars the boys from continuing as children in blissful igno-

rance. While others can find a way back through incomprehension, Boka cannot and he unavoidably has to "[think] about life – about life of which all of us, whether sad or gay, are servants" (208). The *grund* is identified on the symbolic level with Nemecsek and the values he represents, and its subsequent loss offers a spatial extension for the primary experience of death.

Fischer's Locomotive boys are far beyond these lessons of life taught them by their cultural and political surroundings. Their standard reality is that "life of which all of us are servants" in which the 1956 revolution is only a momentary upsurge. Though fight happens in both novels on a physical level, in the case of Fischer's novel it has a broader significance: Fischer's boys are not only limited in their spatial freedom but they are denied the freedom to act freely as active members of society, a freedom which would be their share as grown-up young men. The Paul Street boys have formed at the *grund* their own state, as it were, based on a kind of constitution, but what these underage children could do is not possible for the quasi-adult members of the Locomotive team. For the primary school children of Paul Street, a single lot of two hundred square meters suffices to achieve a sense of freedom but for Gyuri the ability to move with a two-hundred-kilometre radius is the lower limit of freedom. The members of the Locomotive team cannot be satisfied any longer by being active players only on the basketball court: they would like to be active players in the bigger arena of Hungary as well. Therefore, they have to fight for a *grund* for themselves and the events of the 1956 revolution will give an opportunity for this.

Although the opportunity is given, their historical background has robbed Fischer's young men of the patriotism and devotion which is taken for granted by Molnár's boys. In this sense Fischer's novel seems to start where Molnár's ends: in his story the *grund* is lost from the outset, deprivation is an everyday matter and his characters can no longer feel such unconditional love for their country as was roused for the *grund* in Boka's army. This experience is

epitomised in Fischer's work by the viewpoint of Gyuri, who, compared to the Paul Street boys' unanimous acclaim of the *grund*'s defence,[4] receives the revolution with sceptical thoughts: "If [he] thought it could make the slightest difference, [he]'d be leading it" (202). Moreover, the phrase "This can't go on much longer" (234), used earlier by other characters in the novel with hopeful reference to the end of the Communist regime, is uttered by Gyuri with reference to the end of the revolution.

Looking around in the crowd, Gyuri feels envy for those young protesters "who hadn't expended their optimism and could believe that carrying a flag around could change things" (205) – an image which could be a portrait of Molnár's characters. Gyuri is present in the events from the outset for the sole reason to find his girlfriend, Jadwiga, who, unlike him, is akin to the Paul Street boys in her enthusiasm for the revolution. For Gyuri the revolutionary events offer just a delightful change, an occasion when "[t]he reign of boredom had lifted for a day" (208), a day which would serve later as "an anecdote that [enlivens] many an evening in a kocsma" (198). However, while searching for Jadwiga, he gets more and more involved as he experiences anger and hatred. On beholding corpses of protesters after the shootings at the Radio building, the narration reveals that:

> He was surprised how nauseous the sight made him … he had seen enough corpses during the war …. And the anger. He had thought he had wanted to kill people before, but now he knew what the real thing felt like, that he truly wanted to, that it wouldn't be a problem (211).

Later, on meeting Elemér, an AVO officer who tries to slip away from prosecution with his help, Gyuri reflects: "It was a case of either beating him to death or doing nothing" (217). These incidents and maybe peer pressure lead him to the decision of actual participation: "he … fired off three shots in the general direction of the

4 Cf. the passage cited at the top of page 41.

Radio. He closed the window and thanked the couple for their co-operation. He felt much, much better. He had taken part" (213). Although Gyuri is sensitive to revolution being in the air and he does not find it strange when he hears the events termed so (213), he remains unable to grow actually committed to the cause and is all along hesitating between the pressing of his tiredness and staying for the sake of "a once in a lifetime sensation" (207-208).

Taking both novels into consideration, Gyuri represents the absolute negative of patriotic inclination. The whole of Fischer's account of the 1956 revolution forms a contrast with Molnár's story, as do the two novels' characters in terms of their attitudes. Compared to the Paul Street boys' unequivocal braveness and concomitant devotion to their country, Fischer offers controversial attitudes to patriotism and displays alternative hero types. Jadwiga represents Nemecsek's attitude in the novel; they show a striking resemblance to each other in their self-consuming devotion to the cause, which leads to their deaths as martyrs in each case. Their death-defying boldness as it were borders on the suicidal: Jadwiga is running into the heart of fights and Nemecsek would go out to the *grund* when already in a state of feverish delirium. Jadwiga's action is more conscious than Nemecsek's since she is older and more capable of estimating the risk she takes. But Nemecsek is just as aware of his coming death as Jadwiga: her last moment is described as "She knew anyway. 'You won't forget me,' she said" (241), and Nemecsek breathes in his deathbed: "I fought for the others, that they should have the *grund*, too. And I know that it wasn't for myself at all because I'll never see the *grund* again". (190)

Jadwiga and Nemecsek constitute a total counterpoint to Gyuri, for whom the internally motivated bravery they exhibit is unknown. Gyuri can find motivation for bravery at best in an external source: he "could envision rustling up a bravado if there was an audience or some support, but the sort of solo bravery that exists even though there is no one to witness or mark it was, he knew, beyond him" (224). But when it comes to real danger, as opposed to Nemecsek,

who "[g]ladly would … leave all earthly things behind, if only he should not have to leave the *grund*, the "precious '*grund*'" (190), what Gyuri finds is an "enormous, … global … desire" for survival "deep down" and a willingness to "do anything, absolutely anything to live, to live for even a few more seconds" (218).

Gyuri's attitude, which is representative of Fischer's novel, is not only a counterpoint to Nemecsek but also to the entire narrative of Molnár, who compares the Paul Street boys' behaviour during the fight to that of "real soldiers in real combat" who

> "[b]efore meeting the foe, … usually shrink back from the slightest sound. But after the first shot [passes] over their heads, they pluck up courage and often actually become drunk with it, forgetting that they are rushing headlong toward death" (54).

In spite of this, what happens with Gyuri when he gets into a situation of real danger is that "[r]idiculously, in the middle of the shooting he [has] the impulse to shout at the tank crew: 'Stop! You don't understand. I'm a coward. This isn't fair. Find some brave people to shoot at'" (221). Gyuri's cowardice is, however, not simply an inherent quality. Behind the difference of the attitudes of Molnár's and Fischer's characters lies a historical knowledge and the experience of two world wars, for the unprecedented scale, length and casualties of the fights undermined the romantic ideas linked to patriotic war and heroism and, instead, provided evidence that lives are easily lost and that war is impersonal and is against what is best in human nature. Stefan Zweig, the Austrian writer, who represented the same European middle-class values as Márai did in Hungarian literature, sums up this change in thinking in his memoirs entitled (similarly to a previously cited source) *The World of Yesterday*:

> What did the great mass know of war in 1914, after nearly half a century of peace? … It had become legendary, and distance had made it seem romantic and heroic. They still saw it in the perspective of their school readers and of paintings in museums; brilliant cavalry attacks in glittering uniforms,

> the fatal shot always straight through the heart, the entire campaign a resounding march of victory … the young people were honestly afraid that they might miss this most wonderful and exciting experience of their lives…. But the generation of 1939 knew war.… It knew that it was not romantic but barbaric … that the men did not storm the enemy, decorated with oak leaves and ribbons, but hung about for weeks at a time in trenches or quarters covered with vermin and mad with thirst, and that men were crushed and mutilated from afar without ever coming face to face with the foe, … people knew how the giant tanks ground the wounded under them in their path, and how aeroplanes destroyed women and children in their beds.… Not a single individual of the generation of 1939 believed any longer in the God-decreed justice of war: and what was worse, they no longer believed in the justice and permanence of the peace it was to achieve. (Zweig 226-227)

Nemecsek's behaviour displays the enthusiasm of the pre-war generation, for he "really [is] afraid" on his first encounter with chief enemy Feri Áts (27) but goes a long way to reach that level of fearless commitment which entitles him to become the new captain. He is able to arrive there because he is driven by a heroic ideal, an unconditional love felt for his comrades and the *grund* and a determination to defend them. To Gyuri, as a member of the post-world war generation, these drives do not come naturally, and consequently he lacks Nemecsek's motivation. Thus, the answer Gyuri gives to his own question whether "doing brave things ma[d]e you brave, as push-ups made you stronger?" (224) can only be negative: "You don't get braver, you just get tired, bored with fear" (242). In the extreme situation to which the revolution gives birth, he reaches his own limits and in all probability gets into a traumatic state: "noting by the sound of his voice he [is] hysterical" (244) when he makes an escape with Kurucz in the cemetery. But it is this traumatic state that in the end lends him the courage of des-

peration which inspires him to climb into his bed as "a final act of defiance and rebellion" and "[sleep] indefatigably for the next twenty hours in truly passive resistance" (245) in the middle of the Soviet counterattack. It may also be this critical state that compels him to make the final decision to actually leave the country, not just dream about life outside Hungary.

Although Nemecsek and Jadwiga are both victims in the two novels, the presentation of their sacrifice is fundamentally different, and so are the connotations the presentations evoke. In Molnár's narrative the victimization of Nemecsek is strong and his death, narrated from the inner perspective of Boka, who is present during the whole process, is shown in his protracted suffering with considerable pathos. Compared to this, Jadwiga, who is presumably at least as important to Gyuri as Nemecsek is to Boka, dies a sudden death which is related frugally and in a quite neutral tone. The reason for this is that Fischer's novel is not compatible with such deaths as Nemecsek's. Fischer's novel gives a tableau of a world where the individual is so much corrupted with general disinterest and scepticism that traditional values like heroism are no longer valid, and the attempt of society to change the situation indeed "can't go on for much longer" (234) since Gyuri proves to be right and the Soviet tanks invade Budapest. In this world, which had drawn the bitter conclusions of the two world wars, heroic sacrifices as Jadwiga's are without reward; they are an unnecessary waste of human life. Jadwiga's death does not change anything other than Gyuri's life, who suffers the loss of the person most valuable to him. Thus, instead of being heroic, her death on the whole is insignificant and anonymous.

This supposition is further reinforced by the episode with Kurucz, who represents another alternative hero type and the idea of dying with dignity, and, by this act, setting an example to posterity. He says goodbye to Gyuri before setting off for certain death with these words: "I lived like a worm for a long time.… I'm glad I can die like a man.… Well, people will write about us" (244).

However, this dignified attitude is also mocked because Kurucz is indeed shot by the Soviet army but stays alive unnoticed and manages to slip out of the country together with Gyuri.

The difference of the two novels is also shown by the traitor figures appearing in both works. As it is appropriate for the bitter irony of Fischer's narrative, Pataki, the personal hero of Gyuri will turn out to have been the traitor he was looking for at the beginning of the novel and about whom he mused:

> Pataki wouldn't have let this happen. Pataki wouldn't have been conned by a load of Soviet generals. He wouldn't have let them shit all over the country. Gyuri couldn't see how but somehow Pataki would have foxed them, or at least not lost the match before the start. (240)

It is suggested, however, that the role was forced on Pataki and he, who in the essence of his character very much takes after the trickster figures of folk-tales, has tricked the AVO as well by seemingly subscribing to their invitation. Geréb, on the other hand, betrays the Paul Street boys' association for personal reasons, in order to follow his jealousy and ambition. The attitude of the other characters to treason and how they handle the issue is quite different in the two novels. Geréb, because his disloyalty caused an aching disappointment to the others, is deeply renounced; yet, he is offered a second chance and is able to reintegrate into the boys' society. In Fischer's novel, the discovery of Pataki's treason is simply dealt with by Elek, who replies to Jadwiga's question whether she should tell Gyuri that it is "best not to interfere in that sort of emotional traffic" (238). Jadwiga, giving evidence of her affinity to Nemecsek, naturally wants moral satisfaction on discovering the traitor's identity; however, after consulting with Elek, Gyuri's father, she remains silent and maybe Gyuri will never learn that his hero was the informer.

A third viewpoint may illuminate the significant distance between the above approaches to this fairly sensitive issue. Sándor Márai, who, as noted before, represented the middle-class ethics of that optimistic world which Hanák describes, condemned treason

relentlessly. For him treason is the worst of sins and is unforgivable. In his *Füves könyv* (*Book of Herbs*) he dedicates a separate entry to the traitor "who should never be favoured with sympathy." The passage runs as follows:

> In men's trials, whenever possible, opt for absolution. Except when you find the accused guilty of long-planned and cold-blooded treason. Forgive the murderer sooner than the traitor. The murderer in many cases acts on impulse and pays for this with his entire fate.… But the traitor holds your hand, the traitor looks you in the eye, inquires about your plans, sighs with you, moans, promises. Do not ever forgive the traitor. For those who have once betrayed you – man or woman, all the same – there is no test, no plea, no absolution any more. Expel them from your life. Observe their fate without pity. Either in public or in private life they are the lowest, there is no excuse for them. (Márai *Book of Herbs* 44-45)

Márai's novel *The Rebels*, similarly to the novel analysed in this paper, features a society of young men who are betrayed by one of their members. The novel's final scene contains a dialogue in which one of the boys asks the traitor's veteran father whether he knows "the fate of traitors" and he replies: "Indeed, I do. A bullet" (275). And this will be the traitor's end delivered by a gun in his own hand. For Márai treason is a most perfidious assault on middle-class values and for this reason the traitor is beyond redemption; his extradition is a moral necessity and the consequences must be grave, not allowing for a second chance like Molnár's, or Fischer's alternative where the traitor's identity is left uninvestigated and he can remain an admired person for some characters of the narrative. Compared with Márai's statement we can see how far the unconditional forgiveness of Molnár's novel and the overall unconcern of Fischer's world stand from each other.

The Paul Street boys' treatment of the traitor points to a general fair-play attitude which is prevalent in Molnár's entire universe. Geréb is not only offered the possibility to reintegrate into the group;

Boka forbids his being at least verbally reproached, regarding the issue as closed forever (137) and Csele is also "unwilling to betray even a traitor to the enemy" when he is in delegation at the redshirts' (148). There is a shared moral standard in the background of the novel agreed upon by both enemy and defender. Feri Áts declares that he only wants to win the *grund* in a "perfectly regular war" (57) and in keeping with this the rules of fight will be set beforehand by the two captains. Compare to this the Soviet tanks' unexpected invasion of Hungary at dawn by the time the victory of the revolution seems to be sure. In Molnár's narrative Feri Áts appears as a respectable enemy who, too, dismisses Geréb for his underhanded strategy (93) while acknowledging Nemecsek's virtues and holding him in high esteem. It is also this solid and shared set of moral standards which enables Molnár's children to say a unanimous "yes" to Geréb's taking back and praise Boka, as "after all, decent boys" (136), for his yielding to forgiveness. Such naive trust and the fair-play war tactics that characterise the Paul Street boys' fight are only possible in Molnár's innocent, end-of-nineteenth-century world, and are impossible practices in Fischer's universe which has suffered the grave events the history of the following century held in store.

The narrative voices in the two novels respectively mirror this pattern as well. Though Hanák writes that "it would be unfair to mock the wishful thinking of the *belle époque* with the bitter wisdom of the present day" (6), this is what Molnár actually does: he portrays the children in a pretty patronising voice, he is ironic about their childish foolishness and smiles at their inexperience. However, his irony is mixed with nostalgia and a tinge of envy: it looks as if Molnár was mourning for a world that was lost for him forever. Irony is also integral to Fischer's narrative; in fact, it predominates in his tone of narration. Yet, it lacks that nostalgic flavour which is present in Molnár. Molnár distances himself from his characters, regarding them with the superior wisdom of adulthood, but pines for their childish innocence at the same time. In contrast to Molnár, Fischer identifies completely with his protago-

nist and his narration internalizes Gyuri's sceptical irony. Irony in Fischer is the answer given to a permanently inclement situation, and though it springs from hopelessness, it is after all enlisted to serve a therapeutic end. It enables the soul to "throw back its head and just laugh" (207) and it is this subversive laughter which may be a viable survival strategy in the face of complete disillusionment.

There is a danger, however, that by employing this strategy, Fischer's novel should turn into a story of mere disinterested, self-contained *schadenfreude*. That it does not is guaranteed by the fact that the narrative presents a period of genuine, though temporary change. The revolution's presence is recognized even by the sceptic Gyuri and the outside world indeed changes for a couple of days:

> Everyone was on their best behaviour… A bubble of decency had risen out of the earth's core and burst in Budapest.… There were cardboard boxes on pavements … overflowing with banknotes contributed for the dependents of the dead… All sorts of organisations were coming into existence; the old political parties carrying on from mid-sentence where they stopped in 1947. (230-232)

The door opens up for tragedy this way in a completely valueless world: an essentially miserable *status quo* is improved to a level which is sufficient enough to encourage in many the hope for permanent change and drags along even such professed sceptics as Gyuri – whose private life, now that he found a girlfriend, is finally changing for the better. This relative improvement makes it possible that the fundamentally disillusioned Gyuri's sense of loss can measure up to the level the naively hopeful and enthusiastic Boka faced at the first experience of loss. Similar images of the two novels picture the analogous response of the two protagonists:

> The world seemed to be whirling around Boka. Now even those pent-up tears came into his eyes.… He must escape from this faithless strip of land, which had been protected by them at the cost of so much suffering and heroism and which

> was about to forsake them shamelessly in order to take upon its back, for all times, a big tenement house. Outside the gate he looked back once again – as one who forsakes his country forever. (207-208)
>
> Hamstrung by sadness, it was a long walk. "*Dear God,*" thought Gyuri, "*does it really have to be like this?*" … Looking back, Gyuri could see that they were out, because of a far-away row of guard-towers behind them. He was out. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he started to cry. He walked half backwards, as best he could, so that Kurucz wouldn't see. Tears, in teams, abseiled down his face. (245, 250)

A much too fresh and feeble hope is destroyed by the Soviet invasion in 1956, and as it was more difficult for this disillusioned community to rise up, the damage will be the bigger when the *status quo* is restored; "the old caution silently return[s] but an hour out of Budapest" on the train to Vienna (247) and Gyuri, chargeable with armed participation in the revolution and short of a beloved girlfriend, feels he has no other choice but to leave the country.

The present comparison of the works of a Hungarian and a British author, about two groups of boys in different phases of life, living in two historical periods which may be only fifty years apart but enclose the experience of two wars and the establishment of a totalitarian regime in between, yielded numerous points at which Molnár's and Fischer's narratives intersect. The setting is a significant connection between the novels: both draft mental or cognitive maps of Budapest[5]

5 The cognitive or mental map is conceived of in the following definition: "A cognitive map is a cross-section of the world at any given time. The world as *perceived* by a given person may not correspond to the actual world. We are talking about an entity which both *depicts* and *symbolises*, it is the *image* and the simplified *model* of the environment at the same time. Most of all, it is a *mental picture* of the environment living in the head of the person concerned." Letenyei based on Downs and Stea: *Image & Environment: Cognitive Mapping and Spatial Behaviour*. http://hhanuman.blogspot.com/2009/06/mentalis-terkep-kognitiv-terkepezes.html. Accessed: 30 April 2010.

which are partly overlapping. Üllői út of the ninth district of Budapest plays a significant role in both narratives as it is the major route into Budapest for the Soviet troops (231) in Fischer's book, while in Molnár's work it is an avenue which the Paul Street boys touch daily but the wideness and endlessness of which astonish them still. The major fights of the '56 revolution and the battle of the *grund* take place on the opposite sides of this very same street,[6] only on one side of the street the outcome is a glorious, although temporary victory and on the other it is a devastating defeat. Cognitive maps are important resources of cultural memory and this pair of novels demonstrates that the same locations often activate collective memories of opposing emotional reference. Such opposition is observable between Tibor Fischer's and Ferenc Molnár's novels: the former starts where the latter ends and the closer analysis of the two narratives shows that the outlook and attitudes they encode are like oil and water. These attitudes are outlined against the backdrop of loss: the loss of a country or a *grund* of their own and the pointless death of a beloved person. The irreconcilable world-views in which these parallel events of loss are embedded reinterpret points of connection between the two novels as signposts of their distance.

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6 See Appendix B.

ben [*The World of Yesterday – Hungarian cities at the turn of the century on paper and in pictures*]. Eds. Jalsovszky, Katalin; Tomsics, Emőke. Békéscsaba: Officina Nova, 1992: 5-7. http://www.sulinet.hu/oroksegtar/data/tudomany_es_ismeretterjesztes/Magyarorszag_varosai_a_szazadfordulon/flash1/flash1.htm. Accessed: 25 April 2010.

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Appendix A
Original texts of quotations translated from Hungarian

Page 6
A *belle époque* csillogása, a hosszú békekorszak prosperitása és biztonságérzete magától értetődő eleven valóság, mondhatjuk: létevidencia volt, hiszen mindezt a tudomány és a technika szakadatlan racionális csodákkal bizonyította. A századforduló embere szemében a haladás még lineárisnak, a civilizáció áldásosnak, az életminőség javulása töretlennek látszott. És ha történetesen Magyar volt, akkor számára a Millennium a haladás és derűlátás nemzeti bizonyítékául is szolgált, hiszen duzzadó életerőt, az ország szilárdságát tanúsította. … Haladáshit, prosperitás, biztonságérzet látható és megtapasztalható valóság volt – akkor is, ha elandalította és elvakította a kortársak zömét. Budapest tüneményes felserdülése, királyi vára, parlamentje, palotasorai elfedték az álpilléreket, a körfolyosós lakások szegénységét, a külvárosok kaszárnyáit és az agrárövezetek falusias udvarait. (Hanák 6)

Page 7
A *Pál utcai fiúk* a polgárrá cseperedő városi ifjúságnak álma a demokráciáról, a köztársaságról, az egyenlők társadalmáról. (Nemeskürty)

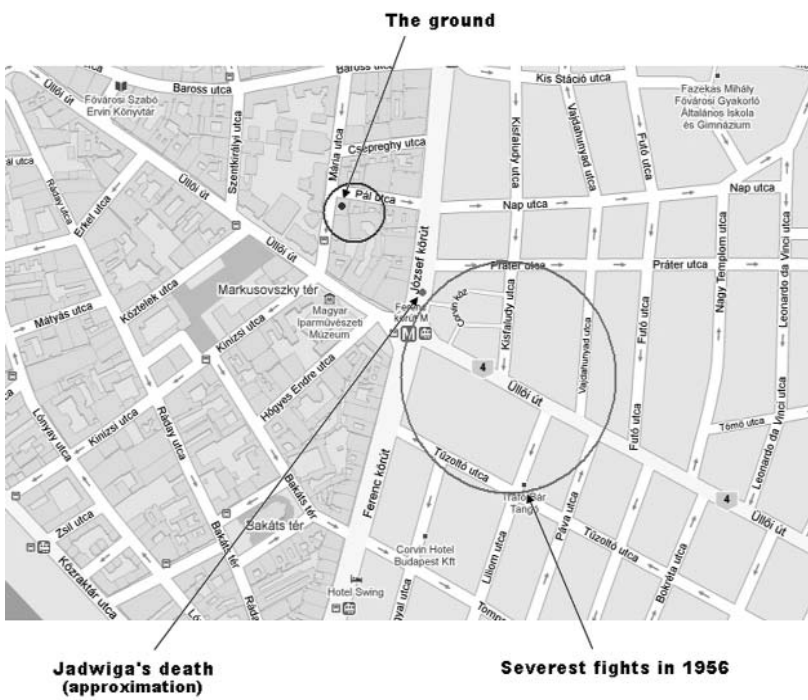
Page 30
Arról, hogy az árulót nem kell sajnálni
Az emberi perben, amikor csak lehet, felmentő ítéletet hozni. Csak akkor nem, ha a vádlottat lassan és hidegen kitervelt árulás bűnében találod bűnösnek. A gyilkosnak is hamarább bocsátani meg, mint az árulónak. A gyilkos legtöbbször indulatban cselekszik, s egész sorsával fizet érte.… De az áruló kezed szorongatja, az áruló szemedbe néz, terveid faggatja, veled sóhajt, nyög, fogadkozik. Az árulónak ne bocsáss meg soha. Aki egyszer elárult – férfi vagy nő, mindegy –, annak számára nincs többé vizsga, mentség,

feloldozás. Száműzzed életedből. Részvét nélkül nézzed sorsát. Közösségben és magánéletben ő az utolsó ember, nincs mentség számára. (Márai *Füves könyv* 44-45)

Page 35, Footnote 5

A kognitív térkép a világot egy adott időpillanatban megjelenítő keresztmetszet. A világ [sic!] ahogy az adott személy *látni véli*, nem feltétlenül kell helytállónak lennie. Olyasmiről beszélünk, ami a környezetet *jelképezi, ábrázolja*, illetve egyszerre *képmása* és leegyszerűsített *modellje*; valami, ami mindenekfelett a környezet *mentális képe* egy adott személy fejében. (Letenyei)

Appendix B



Flóra Kollár

Tibor Fischer's Parallelisms

When I asked Tibor Fischer about the similarity of Oceane and Eddie Coffin, the parallel features of their lives in his novels and the similarity of his two books, he said he tried "to make them different, but there is a common ground of course. All my characters tend to be not successful."[1] In my paper I would like to show the common features of the two protagonists of *The Thought Gang* and *Voyage to the End of the Room*. Furthermore, I would like to point out the parallelism in their lives, how their lives and their attitudes to life itself change in the course of the novels, together with some other motifs that are similar in his books.

Both Eddie Coffin from *The Thought Gang* and Oceane from *Voyage to the End of the Room* are first-person narrators, which makes the similarities stand out even more. When I started reading *Voyage* I did not realize the main character was a woman until the shoe collecting mania made me suspicious. So I read the back of the book, which told me the narrator was a 'she'. Although later on this became obvious, the style of the two narrators is so similar that, having just read *The Thought Gang*, I immediately associated Oceane with a man. Both of them use sophisticated, intelligent language, though Eddie's vocabulary seems more extreme, and his language harder to understand.

There are many linguistic games in *The Thought Gang*. The author plays with language and philosophy in a very entertaining way: "If it's pointless, what's the point? If there's a point to it, what's the point?" (255) Critics, however, disagree on whether Fischer is

1 He came to our class on March 17, 2008.

overdoing his language games in the novel. John Updike wrote in *The New Yorker* that *The Thought Gang* "could serve as a textbook example of an author outsmarting himself." On the other hand, according to another reviewer, Carey Harrison, it is also "a bundle of delights, a fireworks display of jokes, an acrobatic display of language tormented by a professional linguistic arm-twister." I found the language difficult, but natural to Eddie. He is a smart but lazy and very ironic philosopher who likes to make fun of everything. Playing with language and making it difficult to understand goes well with his character. The author himself said in an interview that "*The Thought Gang* linguistically was probably more extreme, but that's because I have a Cambridge philosopher as the central character. If you can't have fun with the language of a Cambridge philosopher, then when can you?" (Hogan)

One of the main points I would like to highlight is what the author himself pointed out, namely, that his heroes tend to be not successful. It is not really their lack of success I would like to emphasize, because Oceane is rich and that might be regarded as a possible form of success, but their burnt-out quality; they are finished, somehow. They do not seem to expect anything more of their lives, and are contented with the way it is, or just do not have enough energy to change it. They do not feel the urge to find something to live for.

If we look at them from the outside, they are very different. Eddie is a fifty-year-old bachelor philosopher who has nothing left to do in the world. Hunted by the police, he goes to France to die with good food and good wine. Oceane is a thirty-year-old woman who has money and a flat, but who is also apathetic toward the rest of her life. She never goes out of her flat, does not see the point of leaving it, so she tries to bring the world to herself. "Few pleasures are greater than knowing you can close your door, ignore the world and create your own." (7) That is exactly what she does.

Hostility toward the whole world is characteristic of both of them, but their coping strategies are different. Eddie starts to travel,

Oceane stays at home. However, her not going out involves travel, too. One form of her voyages is bringing different countries into the flat below hers, a flat she also owns. This way she can "stroll downstairs to Finland" (21). The other form is through Audley, whom she meets accidentally and employs as a debt collector and detective. She follows all his travels with the help of multimedia technologies. She sees and hears where he goes and what he does. Another analogy to travel is Oceane's hallway, which she calls a beach "where debris and wrack get washed up" (11).

An interesting point is that Audley does not like to travel abroad, he hates everything about it, but in spite of this, he goes, and Oceane watches. The only times she left the country were when she was in Barcelona and in Bombay. Both times she only saw the brick wall opposite her window, but never got around to seeing the city. A third time she stayed in a boat with a cute guy and never set foot in France. The author acknowledges in an interview that "[i]t would be pretty dull if she just stayed in her room all the time – so obviously, I cheat. Because, paradoxically, the other thing I wanted to do is – it's sort of a novel about travel." (Birnbaum)

Jay McInerney wrote about Tibor Fischer in *The New York Times Book Review* that "His books take the form of zany, erudite travelogues – packed with entertaining, if pointless, anecdotal diversions". I believe that this is true, except that the anecdotes are not pointless. They are what make the novel interesting and funny. Both books are travel novels and take the heroes to certain places: Eddie to the cities of France, Oceane to Yugoslavia, Chuuk and in her past to Barcelona. However, Fischer's characters do not just travel in space, but in time as well.

This is the second point I want to make: the similarity of the way their respective pasts emerge in the novel. When we first meet them, they are already both somewhat cynical and tired of life. Fischer jumps around in time in both novels, so we get to know the main characters' histories bit by bit. We find out gradually, through small episodes, how they came to be so disinterested in

life, why Eddie just waits for death (besides having a very sick liver) and why Oceane decides there is no point in leaving her flat. The most important segments from their past we find out at the end of each novel.

In *The Thought Gang* the section "Where my life went wrong 1000.1" (293) tells the part of Eddie's past that had Zoe in it. This is when we find out the reason he got into the first scene of the novel, why he got so drunk. Zoe was the love of his life: "When they crack open my heart, they'll find a perfect miniature of Zoe." (295) I think that is why all the Z letter words are used by Eddie, why he admitted everyone to Cambridge whose name began with a Z (237). Also, indirectly she is the reason he has to run from the police to France. "I had wangled her new address, but as I approached the street, there was a power cut … I waited in the gloom for half an hour, then went to a pub in the electrified part of town. The next morning the police sledgehammered through my stupor." (295) Indirectly, she is the reason why Eddie's pessimism changes in the end. The direct influence I associate with Hubert to be further elaborated later is of equal importance, yet, if Eddie had not gotten into the situation with the police in the beginning because of looking for Zoe, he would never have gone to France and met Hubert.

In *Voyage to the End of the Room* Oceane's love is Walter. We hear about him earlier in the novel, but we find out about their relationship and how good it was only at the end, before Audley goes to Chuuk. Like Zoe in Eddie's life, it is Walter in Oceane's life who presents, indirectly, the reason for the change. The direct effect is caused by Audley, but it is Walter's letters that cause Oceane to hire Audley to travel, which generates the change in Oceane's attitude to the world in the end.

The third point is the change in both of them. Eddie Coffin is cynical, he is tired of life, he sees no point in living any longer. We are faced with his cynicism immediately at the beginning of the novel, with the police sledgehammering down his door, and his

giving advice about it; to be "good-humoured and polite" (1). In his interview with Tibor Fischer, Cliff Taylor writes about the author's source of humor:

> Fischer's comedy is often black and always honest.… In *The Thought Gang*, he swipes at that … absurd god, Mammon. "Unquestionably, bank robbery is an illusion," observes the bank robbing philosopher Eddie Coffin. "You take it out but where does it end up? In a bank. Like water, money is trapped in a cycle, it moves from bank to bank. We take it out for some fresh air." So what is the genesis of this prodigious comic talent? That rich vein of traditional Hungarian stand-ups? Fischer courts psychotic envy by claiming his humor comes quite naturally. He is effortlessly, flippantly hip.

It is this black humor that gets Eddie Coffin through all the impossible situations of the bank robberies. However, he meets Hubert and with him comes a change in his life. It is not just that he is becoming a bank robber from (or besides) being a Cambridge philosopher, but there is also a change in his attitude to the world.

In *Voyage to the End of the Room* Fischer's humour is not so prominent, although this work is also full of funny situations and absurd scenes. Yet Oceane is similarly very pessimistic about the world and life in general. She explains why there is no point in leaving her flat: "And what is going out? It numbs you, it stuffs you like a turkey with everyday nonsense: hundreds of mundanities clog, fog and then stop your mind." (35) Furthermore, when she talks about her family, her parents, how they were loving, and together, she explains that this kind of family does not prepare you for the world: "The terrible consequence of being raised in a civilized and loving household is that you are poorly prepared for everything outside." (152)

Her most disillusioning argument is about having children and why she would hesitate about having any at all:

> Not just because of the terrible things that can happen out there, but because of the problem of education. What would

> you teach your kids? Be decent, honest, hard-working? All that's patently a waste of time. It would be dishonest and cruel to raise them in the expectation that behavior like that would earn them affection or success. It would just make them into doormats. (190)

Her pessimism and disinterestedness change gradually because of Audley.

The characters who help the heroes in the novels are also similar. Both Hubert and Audley are somehow involved with crime. Although Audley is more sophisticated, being a debt collector, he also does illegal work such as collecting money that was not owed. Hubert is simply a bank robber, and a bad one at that. Both seem tough, but Hube is falling apart, and without Eddie, bank robbing does not work out well for him. Audley also has his own miseries which we find out about in the "Yugo" chapter, and which reappear in the end with Roberto. However, these are the two characters that somehow unearth the protagonists and give them something to live for, which I will write about in the next paragraphs.

The relationship between the main characters and their partners changes in opposite ways in the two novels. At the beginning of their relationship it seems that Eddie is the one who is helping Hube. Yet, in the end, when they say goodbye, he writes: "Perhaps it was Hube rescuing me in the olive warehouse, rather than me rescuing him." (307) Eddie also says he is left with "something that if it's not optimism, would be hard to tell apart" (306). So Eddie turns optimistic and also has somebody to phone: Jocelyne.

Oceane hires Audley and in the beginning he is the one who helps her. He listens to the story of Barcelona and Walter and travels instead of her to Chuuk. Meanwhile, however, Oceane listens to Audley's war story of Yugoslavia and learns about Audley's father and brothers. In the end it is Audley who is in need of Oceane, and this is what gives her the reason to change her attitude toward the world. A reason to get out of the flat: "I would never have left to save myself, I can see that. Never. But I'll leave to save Audley" she

says at the end of the book. Her change comes with realizing that "home can never be a place, only a person" (251).

There are also smaller similarities in the two novels beside the parallel story lines of the protagonists. Fischer likes to emphasize the incompetence of the police in both books. In *The Thought Gang* the French police are unable to catch Hubert and Eddie, and the bank robbers make fun of the force all the time. Their main target is the Corsican, who becomes the symbol of the incompetent, slow, dumb police officer. Since Eddie comes into contact with constables very often in the novel, we are told about their methods of questioning and the absolute uselessness of the entire force.

In *Voyage to the End of the Room* Oceane tells us about the incompetence of the London police. Since she lives in a very seedy part of the city, she constantly sees crime from her windows:

> In the beginning I used to phone the police and it took me quite a while to understand that they didn't want to hear about any of this. Either they wouldn't turn up or they would saunter up forty minutes after the call, giving the most slothful transgressor plenty of time to make himself scarce. (4)

A very common sentence in the book is "I phone the police, but they don't pick up the phone" (205), or "I pick up the phone and call the police. They don't answer." (239) However, this is not special to London; she gets the same reaction in Chuuk, when Audley gets into trouble with Bruno: "I get a number for the police in Chuuk and phone them, but they don't pick up the phone." (225)

I felt there was a similarity in the presentation of sex and violence in the two novels as well. In *The Thought Gang* violence is one of the main themes, since bank robbing cannot be done without a gun, and even if Eddie is not an aggressive person, Hubert is. There are many scenes involving violence, such as the two bar fights, when Hube breaks a bottle on his own head and when he makes the North African who painted Eddie's head blue nail his friends' lips to the counter. The importance of having a gun is seen by Eddie too, when he meets an aggressive car driver, and shoots

the car to pieces. They demonstrate their power in the small bookshop and of course in beating up the Corsican occasionally. In the end, the olive warehouse becomes the scene of more violence, but not murder. I think no one is murdered by them throughout the book, and all the violence displayed is somehow not scary or ugly, just funny. I think the comparison to Quentin Tarantino's style by Cliff Taylor is very exact.

Similarly, sex is an important theme in *Voyage to the End of the Room*, mostly because of Oceane working in a live sex show in Barcelona. However, it is never written of in an ugly or abusive way. As violence is just a natural part of the story in *The Thought Gang*, so is sex in *Voyage*.

The two main characters' attitudes toward these themes, which are very much connected with their jobs, is also similar. Eddie is a bank robber and Oceane plays in a live sex show, which are two very unusual jobs. They, however, get used to it quickly. Eddie admits: "I hate to say it, but after a while bank robbery becomes a bit boring" (188), and Oceane writes: "After the first few nights it became like any other job" (90).

The way the two novels are structured is also very similar. Even though *Voyage to the End of the Room* has chapters, it is broken up into smaller units, much like *The Thought Gang*. These parts are headed by a word or phrase also the same way as in the other novel, or by the tiny beach picture, which I would compare to the question marks in *The Thought Gang*. Philosophy goes with question marks, and Barcelona, sex, "travel", and letters on a hallway beach go with a miniature palm tree in the sand.[2]

Both of the novels are about a burnt-out character somehow being drawn out from his/her apathy by another seemingly crazy person. Eddie and Oceane have a very similar cynical sense of humour that makes tragic things seem funny, and violence and sex

2 The author said, when he came to our class in March 2008, that the picture was his choice; he would not leave such a thing to the publisher.

normal. Throughout the book the heroes are shaped by Audley and Hubert and their travels. We find out about their past slowly, learn of their loves very late in the novels and receive answers to why they are the way they are in the beginning from flashbacks to the past. Their attitude toward the world gradually changes, but they only admit to this change in the end. They get something: optimism and someone who makes it worthwhile to live or to leave the flat for.

I would like to emphasize that even though the two novels are parallel in their story lines and I think the main characters are also similar, I would never say that reading one means you know both. They are about the same problem but from different perspectives. For one thing, Oceane is a woman and Eddie is a man. I have already stated their likeness, yet there is a big difference, since they carry the characteristics and attitudes common to their respective genders. Similarly, their ages make their points distinct. Oceane, being thirty, has almost all of her life still in front of her, while Eddie with his fifty years is more in the middle of it. This way they need different situations and different people to make them move on. The style is, of course, similar; the two novels being written by the same author makes that inevitable. However, I think that Tibor Fischer changed, too, in the course of the ten years between the writing of the two books. Oceane seems a more mature character than Eddie, despite the age difference between them.

Similarities notwithstanding, the novels are very different. *Voyage to the End of the Room* told me something about the importance of having other people to care for, that without such a person or such people in my life, it is difficult to find a reason to leave home. *The Thought Gang* is about a different period in life when the first part of it has already been lived, and not that well either. Yet it is never too late to start over: this Eddie learns in the course of the story.

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DÁVID KLÁG

The Narrative of Tibor Fischer's *Voyage to the End of the Room*

Introduction

The 2004 edition of Tibor Fischer's *Voyage to the End of the Room* features the following advertisement blurb from the *Times Literary Supplement* on its back: "Fischer has indeed written the novel for the modern metropolitan."[1] The quote was obviously written exclusively to decorate the cover, with no other printed evidence in sight, but it does raise an interesting issue: who or what is a modern metropolitan, and how much does *Voyage* convey their feelings, desires and wishes? My paper is determined to explore this idea and the narrative means Fischer is using to pursue it.

Possible Sources of Inspiration

Despite what the blurb says, the essential idea of *Voyage* was not conceived in the years leading up to 2003. As a review in the *Guardian* notes, Fischer must have been heavily influenced by the French novel *Á Rebours* (*Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*, depending on the translation) by Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans' s book, published in 1884, concerns the life of an aristocrat who becomes tired of the debauchery of Parisian life, and retires to the country.

The protagonist then spends most of his – and the book's – time contemplating the artistic values of the artifacts and works he sur-

1 Shippey, Tom. "The naked blonde and the helicopter," *Times Literary Supplement*. (August 29, 2003; ed., Cs. M.)

rounded himself with, studying Latin, participating in increasingly surreal episodes to pass the time, admiring modern literature and fine art, while dismissing anything that came before, and without a single and extremely short exception, never leaving his home.

Huysmans's novel was a success at the time, although a scandalous one: *Against Nature* represented a direct and radical break with naturalism, which dominated contemporary literature, and signaled a shift towards symbolism. Even before Proust's *Á la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, first published in 1922), it essentially established a genre of its own, paving the way for further novels of stream-of-consciousness by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and, finally, Tibor Fischer.

The focal point in these experimental novels was the idea of staying physically still while letting the mind wander through the use of fine art and literature in Huysmans, the personal memory in Proust and modern technology in Fischer. In *Against Nature*, reclusivity is prompted by a sense of disgust and a vacant feeling evoked by the immorality of the world, in *In Search of Lost Time* an involuntary remembrance prompts further memories to be recalled, while Fischer deploys what is commonly known in the film business as a MacGuffin. The term, allegedly invented by British filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock based on an old joke, is an element of the plot which bears enough significance to launch the characters into action, but its actual nature has no importance whatsoever. For Fischer, it is a letter from Walter, the presumed-to-be-dead ex-lover of the protagonist, which starts the narrative ball rolling.

Professor of Mexican literature at Clark University, Carol D'Lugo has immersed herself in studying and teaching what she calls the "fragmented novel" or in her words "a novel that announces itself as non-traditional." When she is clarifying the description in an interview, she claims that most of us think of books of the 19th century when we are thinking about traditional novels: books which have a straight plot-line and offer linear development. In contrast, she says, fragmented novels demand an active reader

and might do anything to show that they are obviously fragmented: they separate chapters or even sentences with blank spaces, asterisks, pictures and generally refuse to offer a linear experience. Reading a fragmented novel, "you are automatically engaged," she says. D'Lugo mentions *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar as an example which "features a strong suggestion in the first part of the book that you can read it in whatever order you choose." Cortázar's novel includes 155 chapters, 99 of which are deemed expendable by the author, and the reader can either choose his own path in finishing the book, follow a table provided by the writer, or read any chapter at random. Cortázar's book is usually classified as belonging to magical realism, along with the works of Borges and Marques.

A more radical type of postmodern writing – which, interestingly, has its roots in the surrealist movements of the early 20th century – is the cut-up technique, first used by surrealist and later by dada artists in the 1920s. The technique meant that either already existing sentences and parts of text or freshly written ones were mixed, then selected at random, in order to create a new batch of text. This process received relatively greater publicity when used by William S. Burroughs in his novels, essays and other works. Burroughs came in contact with the technique through Brion Gysin, and was the first to use a tape recorder to record literary experiments. In an interview by Daniel Odier published in the collection *The Job*, Burroughs says, "I would say that my most interesting experience with the earlier techniques was the realization that when you make cut-ups you do not get simply random juxtapositions of words."

The *Voyage*

Fischer's book seems to be a mixture of all these influences: there is very little action in the present, and most of the narrative is delivered through observations and internal monologues, while events of the past are remembered in vivid detail. The sections of the nar-

rative of the female protagonist, at least in the Vintage UK edition, are separated with tiny pictures of stylized desert islands – a double reference to both the isolating effect of modern technology and the name of the main character, Oceane.

The strict plot synopsis of *Voyage* is relatively simple: Oceane, former sex-theatre actress in Spain, after receiving a large sum of money for designing a single character for a computer game, refuses to leave her apartment in London. She is, however, shaken by a letter she receives from her former lover and fellow employee from Barcelona, whom she believed to be dead. Through a chance meeting she hires debt collector Audley to investigate the appearance of someone who should not be appearing at all.

The trick Fischer uses in this book is to push the main storyline constantly to the background: the narrative is littered with seemingly unrelated episodes (Audley's misadventures in war-stricken Yugoslavia) and anecdotes (again, Audley's stories about previous clients or colleagues) and even the recollections of Oceane, which distract attention from the seemingly central search for Walter. But these parts are just as integral to the work as every other storyline, not because they advance the plot towards its resolution, but because they are the main guidelines to Fischer's aim to ridicule and lampoon modern technology and its antisocial effects.

There have been many words said and written about the alienating nature of technology, how addictive it is, how infuriating it is to witness the addiction from an outside perspective, and how easily it makes someone neglect their most basic needs. With Oceane, however, it was not a necessary choice: she was successful at her job, adventurous in her early twenties and quite intelligent and witty all her life. Her decision was a result of free choice; she determined that this was something she could do, and not something she had to do. Oceane surrounded herself, just like the protagonist of Huysmans, with a massive collection of contemporary art, most notably a huge collection of music, and as the stereotyp-

ical woman, a vast amount of shoes. The only distance she walks is to check her mail at the door, at the section of the house she calls 'the beach.' Since she is interested in foreign cultures, habits and fashion, she hires a manager who would arrange dinners for her with people from foreign countries. In her own words: "In the last two years I have visited Japan, Ecuador, Jordan, Italy, Nigeria, Indonesia, Brazil and China. I like to immerse myself in a place, learn a bit of the language, read up and observe. The satellite dish up on the roof gets me almost everything and the net does the rest" (34). All of her experiences are second-hand, although delivered with the attributes of the real thing. The dinners that are organised for her resemble an interactive exhibition in a museum rather than a social event. Her guests are grouped to represent every possible aspect of the selected country's lifestyle and social arrangements, the food prepared is the finest of the national cuisine and the topics of conversation are centered on everyday life as the object of scrutiny. The idyllic mood is somewhat distracted, however, when a young Finnish drunkard wants to bed the protagonist, yet another stab by Fischer at turning even the most simple situation into something unbearably awkward.

This scene demonstrates the motif of ambiguity, a defining feature of the book's setup, by introducing an element of impersonality in the most personal situations. With some exceptions, dinners are usually friendly, sometimes intimate affairs, especially in someone's home, yet Oceane's dinner chats and conversations are distant at best. She has four people, who meet for the first time, who have nothing in common with the host, and are only serving her purpose – basically, she is using them as living pie charts and guidebooks. The whole purpose of friendship and hospitability is turned upside down. This idea is further reflected in Oceane's work in Barcelona. She is working as a performer in a live sex show, providing a spectacle of various intercourses on stage, but in her words "after the first few nights it became like any other job" (90). In Barcelona, sexual relations become so common, so ordinary and

mundane that the most valued connection one can make in the club is friendship. So, when Oceane's last attempt to summon her friends proves futile, she is pushed one step closer to living as a high-tech recluse. Brad Vice of the *San Francisco Chronicle* hints at a different, or rather, more technological explanation of the heroine's well-being, namely that "her comfort is a fluke, an accident of dot-com era economics." This seems to suggest that Oceane's choice to take comfortable refuge is not a conscious decision, but an effect that society and the economy had on her. Fischer even hints at this when the protagonist mentions that "my only tip for becoming rich is not to try" (11).

And this is another crucial point of *Voyage*: the cause-and-effect relationship of seemingly random events, including the infamous cow which lands on the roof of the Barcelona club crushing the performer, and the brother of Audley, who was shot on the street by seemingly no one present, or even Audley's misadventures in Yugoslavia – they all seem scattershot and unfounded, but they do provide material for the narrative.

These random events, anecdotes and stories constitute the backbone of *Voyage*, which raises the question whether the main story of the book should make sense, or should be interpreted as a series of vignettes strung together. If, despite the underlying mystery plot, we take the latter to be the case, the book seems to be the ideal example for the fragmented novel mentioned above. The chapters are almost interchangeable, the musings of Oceane have no thread whatsoever and there is an obvious lack of chronology in most of the novel.

The title of the five chapters ("Here", "Barcelona", "Yugo", "Chuuk", "Sunk Island") all convey a sense of travelogue, which turns out to be false. In the first two chapters, wandering around Europe happens only in the mind and memories of Oceane, whereas the last three chapters focus on Audley, rather than Oceane, first presenting his recollections and then his physical journey. According to several references in the book, the Barcelona and

Yugo episodes are just sidetracks compared to the main plot, and Oceane and Audley tell their tales only to pass the time, so these two parts are not vital elements of the story, and in the case of Oceane, not even important enough to register the changes of character: the female protagonist in Barcelona and London seems to be two completely different persons despite the identical voice. The person in Barcelona was adventurous, outgoing and never content with her current situation, whereas Oceane the Londoner is closed-off, and too nonchalant and restrained to go out, although still interested in the outside world. For Audley, however, something seems to register from his episode in Yugoslavia (not to mention the point that the final revelation of the book is closely linked to that chapter). His motives and behavior changed during his time in the war; or, to be more precise, his experiences have made him a tougher person, if not necessarily a deeper one.

As the *Times* blurb noted on the cover, this is the book for the modern metropolitan. According to the book itself, being metropolitan means city-, or even country-hopping, collecting experience, which can go either way, as in the cases of Oceane and Audley: one can either decide to become a recluse, shutting out the outside world and living among the confines of the four walls, or become a foot soldier, paid for and cared for, but ultimately losing all personal freedom. And this is exactly what Fischer's definition of a metropolitan might be: a person who loses his individual freedom to be free to move, or loses the freedom to move towards individual freedom. While in the case of Oceane financial freedom was more or less granted, for Audley, life drifted him toward a different destination every day. Hopelessness, homelessness and confinement are what Fischer's heroes have to deal with.

What a metropolitan novel means for the reader is something different. We are treated to exotic countries, cities and landscapes, but we get no details about them. We are presented with horrible situations, but we are not involved enough. When Audley is coming across a village in Yugoslavia, he declines any comment about it to

Oceane: "I won't tell you what we saw in the village. You don't want to know." (171) One of the harsh reviews of the book, written by fellow author Jay McInerney, points out in the *New York Times* that "all we can say is, thanks for nothing." But this lack of complete knowledge is what makes the book's message fascinating: we can never ever experience something completely on our own, we can never know anything fully about a certain location, or in fact, about the world. Pieces of information are gathered from different sources, just as Oceane attempts to know Finland by meeting Finnish people in London. We can never know Barcelona or the war in Yugoslavia by the account of one person only. In fact, Fischer closes *Voyage* with the observation that even the notion of a familiar place may not exist: "Home can never be a place, only a person." (251)

Conclusion

For many detractors, Tibor Fischer's *Voyage to the End of the Room* feels like a glossy novel the shortcomings of which, such as the elliptical narrative, lack of serious character development or chronological order, are overcome by a witty and genuinely entertaining style. In this essay I tried to point out that these shortcomings are actually important tools of writing for Fischer to convey what he wants to say about alienation, personality and experiences in modern day-to-day living. His narrative in *Voyage* is indebted to the stream-of-consciousness novels of the early 20th century as well as to magical realism. The work largely consists of stories and anecdotes the characters tell each other, and there is little sense to be made of the plot itself. Still, these vignettes, both in their structure and content, make *Voyage to the End of the Room* what it actually is: a travelogue not to foreign countries, but to the modern human psyche, which is just as full of intentional ellipses and omissions as Fischer's book.

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ÁDÁM CZITROM

Cyber-Mimesis and Modern Entertainment in Tibor Fischer's *Voyage to the End of the Room*

"Heaven would be a place where bullshit existed only on television. (Hallelujah, we's halfway there!)"
Frank Zappa in *The Real Frank Zappa Book*

How should we interpret the world of *Voyage to the End of the Room* in light of Frank Zappa's idea of heaven? Shall we regard it as the individual heaven of a woman who had consciously banished all "bullshit" to exist only on screen? Or are we in fact dealing with the very opposite, that is to say, a hell where the realms of telecommunication and real life have ceased to be distinguishable from one another?

While until fairly recently the chasm between television and reality was a popular issue to dwell upon, the notion of *"only on television"* seems to have gradually lost its appeal, as it appears as though 21st-century entertainment – having exhausted all its fictional resources – had shifted its focus onto *the real thing*. The growing popularity of reality shows, social satires, political documentaries etc. suggests that the public has grown weary of the idea of television providing an alternative reality. Instead, we developed an urge to reproduce, exhibit and respond to everyday reality, or at least to an idea we had constructed of it. Entertainment today is much more documentary than ever before; it no longer strives for stories to be larger-than-life. It believes in the ability of the mundane to be entertaining, as well as in its own capability to condense reality, our reality, to a point where it would become easier for us to say "it's so true." The rhetorics of this phenomenon could easily

be compared to that of a puppet show which is reputed to be more real than life itself for the very reason that it is able to reduce complex phenomena to clear-cut concepts. *Observe the paper moon in its absolute moonishness!* It lacks the ambiguity reality would endow it with, and thus subverts the pure idea and sentiment "moon" originally attempts to convey.

The world *Voyage to the End of the Room* depicts is, of course, full of ambiguities, and in this sense has nothing to do with puppet shows. Nevertheless, the novel exhibits a perverted form of the same ontological synthesis of real life and media where reality, instead of being the object reproduced and reflected upon, behaves rather as a by-product of an all-encompassing, elusive system of randomness governed by paradigms inherent in the computer world where things (just like in the novel) virtually pop-up, link into each other, perhaps get mysteriously erased and then re-pop in a completely unexpected context. This is the realm postmodern criticism refers to as *cyberspace*. By definition, all actual or slightly extrapolated phenomena rooted in this realm or the new perspective and experience it gave birth to are associated with the term *cyberpunk* (Bán 62). In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to examine Fischer's novel within the critical and aesthetic framework of cyberpunk. In doing so, I will rely chiefly on Zsófia Bán's essay written on the subject.[1]

One of the strongest traits of cyberpunk literature is the penchant for treating cyberspace not only as an environment for the plot to unfold in but as a central subject matter to reflect upon. Moreover, often the text itself is realized as a direct product of the virtual world it intends to portray (e.g., hypertexts). If the virtual reproduction of reality should be regarded a form of *cyber-mimesis*, the twist of self-referentiality within the present context would

1 This work has served as a basis for many ideas conveyed in the present essay. All citations from Zsófia Bán's study have been translated from the Hungarian by the writer of the present essay.

result in what I like to think of as *meta-cyber-mymesis*. Similarly to films such as Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) or Cronenberg's *EXistenZ* (1999), the network in *Voyage to the End of The Room* extends well beyond the fictional horizon of the novel. As the network gradually becomes metaphorical, so its bearings on the construction of the plotline, the language and even the typography of the text (which might appear to some as a kind of blog or online diary) become more and more apparent.

Exploring the generic characteristics of cyberpunk, Bán claims "it is doubtful whether there is any other genre which has such strong and ramifying bounds to its own present." Emphasizing the difference between science fiction and cyberpunk, Bán adds:

> It is exactly *this* quality of cyberpunk, i.e., its concern with the present, or better yet, with a kind of *extended present*, a very near and tangible future, which primarily distinguishes it from the genre of science fiction. The latter depicts a world by pointing to a utopian or dystopian future, disregarding the source of its impulses. In contrast, cyberspace is – as Gibson puts it in *Neuromancer* – 'the consensual hallucination' of humanity from which even those cannot withdraw themselves who, for whatever reason (being a member of an African tribe for example), might not have ever logged on to it. Willingly or not, everyone becomes part of it to some extent, just as when printing spread and changed culture on a global level, regardless of whether one could read or not. (62-63)

Cyberpunk attempts to create the sense of a near and tangible future by rethinking and further developing the cutting-edge scientific initiatives of the era the work was written in. It takes its cue from the reality of the consumer, thus often rendering the activity of reading part of the universe it constructs. The easier it is for the reader to trace back processes occurring in cyberpunk reality to their origins in their own continuous present, the more they will be capable of relating to the story. It is not enough, therefore, to merely reflect on the given medium of the cyberpunk work and extend it

through as many layers and meta-layers as possible; there has to be a distinguishable rapport between the era the work portrays and the present in which it is being absorbed. In the present case, the computer world is indeed significant for Fischer's creative enterprise, not only considering the fact that his heroine is a computer graphics designer, but also, lest we forget, the author himself wrote the novel with the aid of a computer or a laptop.

The world of *Voyage to the End of the Room*, in contrast with most cyberpunk works, shows no evident trace of any technological development whatsoever, therefore the story might as well take place in our times. It rather concentrates on a social/psychological experience and behaviour to which the aforementioned synthesis of media and real life might lead, and perhaps is already in currency. Nevertheless, in spite of evidence in the novel to support the idea that the story is set in our time (e.g., the war in Yugoslavia), the extensive emphasis on high technology gives the reader an impression of the near future. One strand of the novel that intensifies this impression is the sense of Americanization Oceane's London had undergone. Even though the basic setting (or headquarters) of the novel is specified as Oceane's London apartment, the general atmosphere of the novel in terms of its genius loci takes on a rather Pynchon-like New Yorkesque air of an American megalopolis with all its futurism and filth. Oceane's solitariness can also be more easily associated with the kind of alienated New Yorker lifestyle Wolfe describes in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987). This may imply that the story does in fact happen in the future, since London – as it seems – must have undergone a process of Americanization which obviously takes time, especially in a place infamous for its respect for tradition like England.

Central to postmodernism is the penchant for superimposing remote cultural discourses over each other and thereby attaining what could be best characterized as an *eclectic inclusiveness*. Fischer's novel, just like the network it focuses on, is global, all-encompassing and very fast: from the privacy of Oceane's room

we are shifted downstairs to "Finland" with a foreign experience which barely includes leaving the apartment, then without any former notice we are in a striptease bar in Barcelona, then dropped into the battlefields of Yugoslavia; all this while travelling in Micronesia in order to track down a missing letter from a dead friend. Moreover, all through the story characters from all over the world constantly broaden the geographical and cultural scope of the novel, either with their mere presence or the stories they randomly tell – see for example Roberto's intention to "investigate the ontological difference between galuska and nokedli" by opening a restaurant. (247)

Eclectic inclusiveness could be exemplified by those parts of the text that catalogue the most diverse, often random elements which seem to fall into categories Oceane happens to discuss. Oceane's record collection, or the various costumes the strippers in Barcelona wear, exemplify a postmodernist passion for collecting and fitting together elements that had never before been mentioned in the same breath: "I have Lithuanian pianists, Korean violinists, Icelandic tenors, Dutch divas, American harpsichordists, Senegalese cellists, Balinese drummers" (5), or "Policewoman. Cavewoman. Schoolteacher. Schoolgirl. French Maid. Nurse. Blushing Bride. Belly Dancer. Soldier. Geisha. Starship Battleaxe" (55).

Eclecticism assumes a different form in Fischer's fondness for merging elements of high and popular culture, which tendency is, of course, often identified as a *par excellence* feature of postmodernism in general and cyberpunk in particular. According to Bán, categories such as high and popular cease to exist as distinguishable entities within cyberspace-governed reality, as it is a "product of a generation that has been born into a technical revolution which strives for decentralization as opposed to hierarchism" (64). In the case of *Voyage to the End of the Room* the reader may observe a similar disposition on Fischer's part, as sophisticated literary techniques and elements of popular entertainment go hand in hand throughout the text. The kind of grotesque, at times vio-

lent humour to be found in films such as *Fight Club* (1999), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *Snatch* (2000), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Kill Bill* (2000) are embedded in a highly intellectual postmodern work which – whether we like it or not – is as existentialistic as it can possibly be. The section taking place at the striptease bar illustrates this double bind, being a parody of a bizarre reality show on the one hand, yet responding to the existential idea of entrapment on the other, as the strippers, for some reason, cannot leave the premises of the bar.

It has been pointed out earlier that the world of *Voyage to the End of the Room* is a particularly globalized one, which assumption appears to be very much consistent with the concept of inclusiveness already referred to. The narrative level where most postmodernist tendencies mentioned so far (eclecticism, inclusiveness, globalization, self-reflexivity etc.) seem to meet most poignantly in the novel is language. Similarly to the way the novel blends elements of high and popular culture, its language can be seen as a random mixture of high and low registers. Fischer's way with language, however, may at times alienate the reader from the text as he deliberately calls special attention to its quirkiness. The inadequacy of foreign characters speaking English at a super-proficient level is a feature hard to miss. The following conversation between Oceane and Rutger clearly illustrates the point:

> 'Great', he said. 'You'd better be good though. I'm a fussy eater. But my orectic potency is more than satisfactory.'
>
> 'What?'
>
> 'Orectic potency. Hey, it's your language.' (137)

The same gag is repeated towards the end of the novel when Roberto and Audley meet again:

> 'It starts with karaoke and it terminates with an American tour with seventy musicians. Mr Sleep wanted to be a singer. He hired the best studio, the best musicians, the best producer. The result: total feculence.'
>
> 'Sorry?'

> 'You should use your own language occasionally, Audley. (244-245)

Not only do Rutger and Roberto use highbrow expressions such as "orectic potency" and "feculence", but they also exhibit a command of English slang. Language in Fischer's novel is, therefore, not only eclectic on the grounds that it encompasses an array of registers but also that it accommodates users coming from different cultural backgrounds.

An essential paradox of cyberpunk which Bán points out concerns the incompatibility between the attempt to deconstruct hierarchical distinctions and the juxtaposition of various social and cultural strata. Bán refers to McHale, who suggests that the solution to this problem should not be sought in dwelling on the presence or lack of cultural boundaries *per se* but in the realization of the speed that cyberpunk reality has attained as a result of its technical evolution, which allows information to oscillate so quickly between various ontological and cultural realms that the boundaries thereof may only be seen blurred, if at all.

One of the things that makes *Voyage to the End of the Room* appear closer to our reality than to a standard cyberpunk novel is the passivity of its main character. The archetypal cyberpunk hero, according to Bán, often appears as a mixture of a computer nerd and a punk, who is able to pass between the various realms of reality. In contrast, we are to meet a classic couch potato as a heroine. Her virtual companion, Audley stands, in a sense, somewhat closer to a cyberpunk hero, yet lacks the most important ability which, alas, Oceane possesses: to reconcile the realms of the virtual and the actual. In *Voyage to the End of the Room* it takes two people to make a hero, it appears.

"Cyberpunk simultaneously utilizes and questions the most fundamental paradigms of postindustrial, postmodern society" (Bán 70), and thus it may appear as a collective hallucination where "everything simultaneously seems to have several times, spaces and forms" (70). Although it is the peculiar chaos about it which ren-

ders cyberpunk so enjoyable, it always seems to uphold some inner logic that structures this chaos, or at least gives the impression of some nostalgic yearning for order. Fischer has been criticized on several occasions on the grounds that the plot of *Voyage to the End of the Room* seems to fall apart. Reviewers noted that the rambling nature of the narrative creates the impression that Fischer subordinates the plot to random ideas and zany witticisms that happen to emerge while he writes the novel, making the narrative unfocused. The ideas expressed earlier in the present study regarding the arbitrary nature of reality may, if identified as cyberpunk, serve as an apology for the apparent shortcomings Fischer is so often criticized for. We might defend the novel by claiming that Fischer's style in this case is absolutely consistent with, and even reflexive of, his subject matter. The fact that *Voyage* is not the only novel in Fischer's oeuvre for which the description *loosely knit* would be an understatement is a different question altogether. Still, our expectations as to what a proper novel should read like are not sufficient reason to approach *Voyage* as something it does not even attempt to be. Many critics insist that they approach the plot linearly, while it should be seen as a sort of mosaic, or even a catalogue of personalized back-stories and anecdotes. Furthermore, Fischer often deconstructs *meaning* in a way that readers will find themselves facing mere *patterns of meaning* which in most cases cannot (and should not) be appreciated according to the logics of cause and effect, or be seen as making up an organic whole by entering into a relationship with other patterns of the kind. It might help to read the novel as though it were half-way to a short story collection or even a diary; this attitude would perhaps help a better understanding of the work, since it calls for a reading that regards each individual section of the text as complete in itself, as opposed to expecting the novel to provide overall explanations for all its bizarre occurrences.

Fischer attempts to establish coherence while deconstructing and juxtaposing fundamental paradigms such as time and space

(flashbacks vs real time, a universal cyberspace vs Oceane's claustrophobic lifestyle), life and death (the letters arriving from beyond the grave), far and near (Oceane's childhood vacations and the concept of a home-deliverable world), or solitude and interaction (Oceane's agoraphobia vs interaction with the world via the network). The basic device with which Fischer operates in order to make the flow of events coherently random is repetition: the same motifs and/or patterns of speech constantly *re-pop* in the most diverse contexts. A good example for the mechanism of such repetition is the *'Syrian lacrosse player'* that emerges in a completely different context about five pages after Oceane had listed her record collection (see citation above): "Afterwards, I learned that the lawyer had been locking his office door when the phone rang and had only gone back in because he had been expecting a call from a Syrian lacrosse player." (10) Other recurring motifs are, for example, a gun barrel always ending up in Audley's mouth, Jorge's concern with local government, diving lessons, Lambeth Council, the elderly couple recruiting whomever they meet for a threesome, and, of course, Rutger: "Oddly, as I handed out my carefully written address to the survivors I had the premonition that I would never see them again, but I was confident that I would see Rutger again. Rutger would turn up whatever I did. He was a turner-upper." (147) Fischer also inverts this pattern by mechanically repeating the same motif in the most depraved variations while maintaining the exact same context, like the mechanism of the series of unresolved deaths at the striptease bar, where the characters die in a consistent pattern in the most diverse ways (drowning, a helicopter crashing because of a glance, getting squashed by a cow falling from the sky etc.).

Oceane's chosen lifestyle is highly ambiguous in the sense that her withdrawal from the outdoor world only makes her latch on to it more extensively through the network. Even though we do not know the exact reason for her recoil, Oceane seems to have a similar reaction to the events of her past as readers who claim the

novel is too rambling and absurd. She retreats and attempts to remain uninvolved, hoping to make *bullshit* appear only on screen. Nevertheless, this is far from Zappa's idea of heaven, as in Oceane's case there seems to be nothing beyond that screen; even her own memories seem to appear rather on her monitor (as though watching a downloaded movie, or playing a computer game) than within her mind. What makes the novel truly exciting is that we can never know for sure whether it is the world which has gone mad, or it is Oceane who has spent way too much time in front of her screen. This might be the essential question the novel boils down to: for how long will we be able to distinguish between the ontological and the epistemological? The novel illustrates very well the contrast between the countless possibilities the global network has to offer and the inability of individuals in the 21st century to detach themselves from this realm, which will perhaps grow to an extent where not a single person will be able to remain outside the circuit. This might be the great thing about our age: we have the world in our hand without having any other choice.

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PÉTER PAPOLCZY

The Narrator Collector

Investigating Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector* as a Synthesis of Narrative Strategies

Introduction

The inertia of objects is deceptive. The inanimate world appears static, "dead" to humans only because of our neuro-muscular chauvinism.
Tracy Johnson

Picking an unlikely narrator gives the author the chance to create an unusual mixture of narrative characteristics. Traditionally, a narrator is either a first-person narrator or a third-person narrator, the former being also a character in the story, the latter providing a bird's eye view of the happenings. According to Auerbach, the first author known to use a first-person-singular narrator was Petronius in the 1st century A.D. With the method came a more direct feeling of reality, the introduction of subjectivity coupled with unreliability, and the problems of telling a story from the point of view of someone limited in space, time and knowledge.

In fact, if we assume that the narrator is a living human being, the choice of a third-person or first-person narrator will by and large determine the features of the narrative. A third-person narrator will typically be omniscient, and unconstrained within time and space – i.e., omnipresent – but will not interact with the characters or the story. A first-person narrator, on the other hand, will possess all the limitations a normal mortal would, but will also have the ability to

create a closer link between the world of the story and the reader. Still, a degree of unreliability is always present, as the subjective "I" tends to be biased. Would Friday tell the same story as Crusoe about their relationship?

Of course, slight deviations from this pattern are possible. Consider the first-person narrator of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), who is so much distanced from the story of the novel that the book reads like one with a third-person narrator. Or consider the way Dickens imposes limitations on his omniscient narrator in the second paragraph of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65):

> He had no net, hook, or line, and he could not be a fisherman; his boat had no cushion for a sitter, no paint, no inscription, no appliance beyond a rusty boathook and a coil of rope, and he could not be a waterman; his boat was too crazy and too small to take in cargo for delivery, and he could not be a lighterman or river-carrier… (Book 1, Chapter 1)

Although this device does help in creating suspense, and does bring the narrator closer to the reader, the narrator's ignorance is implausible, especially in light of the ease with which he reads the minds of the characters in subsequent chapters.

In cases where the author decides to choose a narrator that is either nonhuman, nonalive, or supernatural in any way, an interesting mixture of narrative traits may ensue. For instance, by having an animal narrate a story set in the human world, the author can play with the concept of unreliability, as the picture offered by the narrator would probably be so twisted and fresh at the same time that one would wonder whether it is the narrator or the reader who is unreliable. In his novel *A Living Soul* (1980), Swedish writer P. C. Jersild chose a human brain floating in an aquarium in a research lab as the narrator of the story, producing a narrator with unusual limitations in terms of space, time, and interaction with the other characters.

The present essay aims to investigate Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector* (1997) from the perspective of the narrator. In this novel the first-person narrator is an ancient piece of pottery,

an inanimate object who does have limitations, but the limitations are unlike those of everyday human narrators.

Presenting Mr. Bowl

Although the narrator is of course genderless in the novel, for the sake of convenience, this essay will refer to the narrator as Mr. Bowl, and will use the male personal pronoun in reference to it. The decision is doubtless an arbitrary one, and as one of the themes of the novel is the male-female relationship, it may be an interesting task to analyse the narrator's voice in terms of gender. This, however, is not within the scope of the present paper, so a male narrator will be assumed, although this assigned gender is purely grammatical.

Mr. Bowl is an ancient – or to use his own word ooooooooold – piece of pottery. The reader never finds out what he is exactly; sometimes he is referred to as a vase, at other times, as a flowerpot, and he himself gives a long list of the purposes he has been used for over the millennia. Furthermore, he mentions at one point that he is capable of changing form. We do know, however, that he is Sumerian, although his exact age is never specified. In other words, he was created roughly in the same age as written narrative was. The Epic of Gilgamesh, king of Sumer, is considered to be the first written narrative of mankind, but of course the story itself must be older than its written form. Narration, then, similarly to Mr. Bowl, is of an uncertain age and has taken various shapes during its history.

Mr. Bowl is a narrator on two levels. He is the narrator of *The Collector Collector* but his role in the story is also that of the narrator: he tells stories from his past to Rosa, the art authenticator. Interestingly enough, the communication between them is bidirectional since he is also able to extract stories from Rosa's mind. Thus Mr. Bowl becomes an audience within the story, as well as the narrator. Mr. Bowl's two types of narration are very distinguishable even grammatically, for he narrates contemporary events in the

present tense, while he narrates to Rosa in the past tense. Occasionally, he is reminded of a long-gone event from his life by the current happenings, in which case we get a "past tense story" in the main narrative.

At first glance, Mr. Bowl seems to be a reliable narrator. His knowledge of details, based on centuries of experience, and his large variety of stories are very convincing indeed. Still, he might be bluffing. After all, we have to take his word that he is genuine. He claims that he is an original after whom many copies were made, but are we to believe him? Even Rosa says that "I have the feeling that the bowl is lying". (18) Mr. Bowl's comment on this, "this will be hard work", is also ambiguous, as he might mean that it will be hard work convincing Rosa, or that it will be hard work deceiving her. Additionally, we do not know whether Rosa says this in earnest, or whether it is just a pretext she has found to hold on to the bowl a little longer.

As a matter of fact, the unreliability of any first-person narrator is an underlying theme of the novel. Consider the following dialogue between Rosa and Nikki: "[R:] 'You should write a book.' [N:] 'Who'd fuhking believe me?'" (136) Or the comment Mr. Bowl makes on Nikki's allegation that she was born Nicholas: "Nikki could be lying. But she could be telling the truth. I can't tell on this one." (211)

The second quotation also reveals that although Mr. Bowl has fewer limitations than a typical first-person narrator, even he cannot read the minds of all the characters his story is about. In this respect he resembles other first-person narrators but in many ways he is akin to omniscient ones. Due to his age and adventurous past, he can move freely in time and space in the narratives he presents to Rosa. This, however, is not a supernatural trait: in the main storyline he is as confined as an inanimate object ought to be, and consequently is even more limited than a human first-person narrator would be. On the other hand, he is much more observant and aware of his immediate surroundings than a usual narrator. He can tell that the pawnbroker has not changed his underwear in three

days. He can estimate Nikki's age give or take a few months. And he can tell the time elapsed between events in seconds: "Four minutes twelve seconds after she entered the property, the Jehova's Witness's clothing starts to be removed." (15) This acute observation and attention to detail lends an extraordinary sense of realism to the narrative, which is unusual in the case of first-person narrators; even omniscient narrators tend to skip details they deem irrelevant. Reading the opening lines of the already mentioned *Our Mutual Friend* we can see that even an omniscient narrator will not necessarily brag about his omniscience: "In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise..."

As far as descriptions are concerned, Mr. Bowl's realism diminishes. On many occasions he simply gives us a number and maybe a word or two to describe something: "I find Nikki's nose fits into the one hundred sixty-six classes I have already identified. It's number eighty-eight, or the begonia." (13) The lack of detail is not due to a lack of knowledge; on the contrary, Mr. Bowl has seen so many noses that he feels no urge to circumscribe them, and he simply provides us with a number. Of course all narrators rely on schemas and prototypes when telling a story (Talib, "Characters"), very correctly assuming a knowledge of the world that everyone within a given culture shares. Mr. Bowl is simply being more explicit about it. He does not merely assume a common knowledge of reality, he also assumes the common knowledge of schemas and prototypes, and is at ease referring to the fact. This literary shorthand is in concord with the postmodernist author's grievance that everything has already been written down by others. Although we cannot picture Nikki's nose very vividly based on the above passage, we are let to understand that the detail really is irrelevant: her nose is one of a finite set of noses.

In his relationship with Rosa, Mr. Bowl behaves like an omniscient narrator. He reads her mind, and narrates episodes from her past to us. These parts of the book read like an omniscient third-person narration, in fact, they read like the classical example of the limit-

ed omniscient third-person narration (Talib, "The Narrator"), when limitation comes from the fact that the world is seen through the consciousness of a character, in this case, of Rosa.

To summarize the above from a theoretical perspective, we can ascertain that Mr. Bowl defies categorisation in terms of Gérard Genette's types of narrators. Let us briefly overview Genette's classification of narrators. A *homodiegetic narrator* is a narrator who is present in the story he narrates, while a *heterodiegetic narrator* is absent from the story. In terms of another set of categories, an *extradiegetic narrator* is superior, in the sense of being at least one level higher than the world of the story, and hence has a good or virtually complete knowledge of the story he narrates, while an *intradiegetic narrator* is immersed within the same level as that of the world of the story, and has limited or incomplete knowledge of the story he narrates. (Talib, "The Narrator")

In the case of Mr. Bowl, the degree of his presence varies within the novel. From the stories he reads from Rosa's mind he is absent; in the stories he narrates to Rosa, he is either only an observer or – as in the story where copies are made of him – he is at the centre of the story; and in the contemporary story, he is present as much as can be expected from an object, being carried around, stolen, restored, locked away etc.

It is also difficult to establish whether Mr. Bowl is an extradiegetic or an intradiegetic narrator. He is, of course, completely extradiegetic when he narrates stories from Rosa's past. However, that does not mean that he has complete knowledge of the happenings, as his knowledge cannot be more complete than the knowledge of the person he is reading the mind of. Paradoxically, Mr. Bowl has the most extensive knowledge when he can rely on his own senses, in other words, when he is an intradiegetic narrator.

Although Mr. Bowl is present in the contemporary story, his presence is merely passive until the last episode of the book. It is

unusual for a homodiegetic narrator to have this little interference with the story he narrates. He does, however, save the ladies from Mr. Annihilator by way of metamorphosis. Right before he does so, he even claims that he does not like to interfere. If we see Mr. Bowl as a character, we might see this moment as the one when he changes from a flat character to a round one, and does something totally unpredictable. (Talib, "Characters") We can go one step further and say that this is the point at which, from a mere narrator, he *becomes* a character. To return to Genette's terminology, the degree of homodiegety increases momentarily. Although the reason behind this acting against his own principles can be ascribed to the fact that he has grown attached to the other characters, the temporality of the phenomenon makes it impossible to label it as a true development of character.

Appreciating Mr. Bowl

If we needed to appreciate Mr. Bowl the way Rosa had to, we would have the same difficulties. Genuine or cheap? Is choosing an inanimate object as a narrator to be able to produce a helter-skelter of narrator types a cunning device or a cheap trick? The novel seems to want to convince us that it is the former – just like Mr. Bowl is desperate to convince us that he is genuine – but we cannot ignore the fact that an inanimate narrator is a contradiction in terms (and therefore nonexistent). In terms of logic, all statements made about a nonexistent entity are true. Therefore it was easy for the author to form and shape his narrator according to his convenience; once the reader has accepted Mr. Bowl as the narrator, they will not sceptically claim that a piece of earthenware has no way of knowing for how many days the pawnbroker has not changed his underpants.

The implausibility of the narrator makes any trait plausible once the state of the suspension of disbelief is achieved.

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MIKLÓS MIKECZ

Self-Eating Patchwork

Paradoxical Representation of History and Gender in Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector*

Tibor Fischer is undoubtedly one of the most refreshing and innovative authors of the British contemporary literary scene, each of his novels critically acclaimed as highly original and entertaining works. Although his later books greatly differ from his debut novel *Under the Frog* (1992), Fischer successfully manages to reformulate in his subsequent novels his vision of human absurdity with an unmistakable style characterized by cynical humor and extravagantly sophisticated writing. While many critics complain about the lack of integrity in his rambling narratives pasted together from countless anecdotes, tales, and plot-ideas, the skills of an extraordinary writer, being simultaneously entertaining and thought provoking, remain indisputable. Certainly, his rapid, twisted style of storytelling verging on the edge of incoherence cannot be digested easily, nor can his harsh, sarcastic tone. Nevertheless, these qualities are neatly counterbalanced by the impression of the madly grinning author constantly jumping back and forth between the territories of the deadly serious and the unbelievingly outlandish.

The present essay wishes to argue against the above-mentioned, frequently stated lack of plot in Fischer's novels by providing an interpretation of his third novel, *The Collector Collector* (1997), and attempts to demonstrate that the apparent patchwork of tales is directed by the conscious recycling and blending of two conventional narrative types that are tied together by a subplot. According to the analysis, this subplot is a disorienting play with the reader's expectations about the narrator's reliability and gender. These issues are closely connected to the existential themes of the novel;

in fact, the increasing incredulity toward the narrator's identity is indispensable in the effect of the novel to destabilize conventional assumptions about history and gender.

Recycle, Subvert, and Repeat

Fischer's third novel, *The Collector Collector* is a work of provocative mockery at the same time as it is a delightful play with language and ideas originating in one simple question: what if the objects we use could talk, and, more importantly, what would they talk about? Certainly, the idea does not come as a novelty. In fact, a whole subgenre of novels can be distinguished by the sole fact that inanimate objects narrate them. According to the *Literary Encyclopedia*:

> Novel of Circulation and It-Narrative are both terms coined to describe a particular sub-genre of fiction which developed in the eighteenth century…. These works recount the adventures of a non-human protagonist…. While the framework of these narratives is loosely based around the biography of the protagonist, the bulk of the text is made up of accounts of the various people who have possessed or otherwise come across the narrating object or animal. The two alternative generic labels, It-Narrative and Novel of Circulation highlight the two definitive characteristics of the form: the use of a non-human narrator and the movement of that narrator between otherwise unconnected characters, primarily through processes of exchange.

The recycling of this tradition in *The Collector Collector* is quite obvious. The novel is narrated by an ancient bowl, claiming to have witnessed the development and progress of human civilization, therefore possessing the entire knowledge of history by going through the hands of thousands of collectors. As the bowl starts its monologue while being transported to an authenticator, the talented but exploitable Rosa, whose flat is being invaded by the reckless con artist Nikki, the first-person narration sets out on its rampant

flow of bizarre tales of the past. This narration then is interspersed with the stories of the animate characters heard or mind-read and then told by the bowl. The disjointed sequence of stories – signaling the juxtaposition of past and present lives – produces a peculiar mood for this meditation on history and gender issues fused into a bizarre collusion of the meaning of life and unashamed tales of sexuality. The author's intention is clear: subverting and ridiculing the traditional idea of history with the purpose to amuse and distress the reader at the same time.

One might think that Fischer's treatment of the narrative – as can be perceived in his second novel, *The Thought Gang* (1994), which undeniably signaled an authorial intention to escape from the shadow of *Under the Frog* – finally found its ideal medium. Indeed, what characterizes the overall structure of *The Thought Gang*, namely, the already mentioned pastiche of picturesque stories, is further elaborated in *The Collector Collector*; moreover, it has been supplemented by an inanimate narrator, thus falling into one of the mighty pigeonholes of literature. However, Fischer does not exploit an existing tradition but wickedly twists the Novel of Circulation/It-Narrative genre until it turns against itself. By associating the absurdity of human history narrated by an (obviously) asexual object with the absurdity of the human failure to objectively observe its own sexuality and absorb reality in its entirety, Fischer creates the central metaphor as a widening gap or an expanding bubble. The result is shaped like an Ouroboros, a self-enclosing, self-eating patchwork that represents the path of a falsely personified History, a Grand Narrative that has been looped around the time of Western civilization only to collapse back into its enigmatic origin, the surface of which cannot be penetrated due to errors in human logic. This rapidly mutating collage of bizarre anecdotes supports the basis of a pseudo-plot jam-packed with language games sprouting all over the narrative. By these means, the novel functions to deconstruct History through a process aimed at defying any meaning or message that the text could generate from its

main themes except for the notion of randomness perceived in human civilization, portrayed as stuck in a constant flux of (ec)static sexuality.

The (pseudo-)plot gets its first push when the pot is faced with a rare situation. Rosa, its temporal holder, as the bowl says, is one of the divine ones, "a vase tickler" (10) who can penetrate into the vast memory of the container. The bowl finds this possibility rather disturbing on its part (although it is reluctant to explain why, apart from confessing to feeling naked for the first time in its eternal life). Refusing nudity (an interesting concept if applied to objects) and caring for Rosa's safety ("If she tapped into the full me her brains would shoot out of her nose" (10)), the bowl decides to shield itself with one of its suitable pasts and tries to distract her from close-reading it by telling digressive tales, thus postponing the revelation of truth as long as possible. Since Rosa's character is revealed to be a single woman desperate to find real love, the narrator resolves to fill in the gap and ease her loneliness.

Therefore, one might observe, the text's usage of the main features of a Novel of Circulation/It-Narrative is mutated into a hybrid form by adding the motifs of another narrative type, the frame narrative or a story-within-a-story, its classic example being the story cycle of the *Arabian Nights*. (Bal 52) Indeed, the text shows an extraordinary resemblance to the main plot of the story of Scheherazade. However, the text subtly modifies the prototypical structure of the tales-within-tales story; as opposed to the *Arabian Nights*, where the storyteller is threatened with death by the sole member of her audience if she fails to be entertaining, in Fischer's novel, the storyteller has to make the effort not to kill its audience, and it resorts to telling fictitious tales continually. As the majority of the stories are heavily laced with issues of sexuality and mortality, the text connects sex, love, death, and truth in a genuine way: the postponement of truth and knowledge becomes interchangeable with the postponement of the eternal circle of carnal knowledge, love,

orgasm, total satisfaction, and death. Through this manner of representation, the bowl's interpretation of history is depicted as static, constituted by endless variants of the endless repetition of a mainly repetitive act: sexual intercourse. Or as the bowl says: "carrying out the repetition that people rarely find repetitive". (24-25)

The narrative abounds with instances of phrases reflecting the process of procreation procreating procreation, or tales telling tales telling tales: "It boasts a rich reproduction of a vase with a Gorgon's head on it. A copy of a copy of a copy of a copy. Maybe a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy. One of the Athenian ones. Not that that will save it. I go for them as far as a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy." (31) In another part, the narrator says: "Eaters become eater-eaters who become eater-eater-eaters who become eater-eater-eater-eater-eaters. Very quickly. And they say there is no such thing as progress." (90) Marius, the neurotic lugal next in line to become the collector of the bowl expresses this very idea when commenting on the artifact:

> What do you expect? Dollar signs on the side? This was beautiful when Europe was nothing but a forest, when Egypt was green, when Troy was a couple of fishermen's huts, Athens a few olive trees on a hillside, when pharaohs were scratching their heads for good building ideas, before the flood. This is the work of a human hand from an age we can't imagine: so different from our own, but perhaps not so different … when people still had the same desires. They have always had the same desires. When they wanted to make beauty … and to make love. (56)

The reader gets imprisoned in the mind of the inanimate narrator – who in turn is imprisoned in immortality – but with the promise of receiving great wisdom. In fact, the bowl itself boasts its own genuineness, experience, and knowledge. At one point it says: "Genuine? The genuine ones don't look as good as me. I'm better than genuine. I'm the original, so genuine, the genuine ones look like copies, which, of course, is what they are." (1) Elsewhere, it

says, "Reverence is my quarry, and giving a hint of my pedigree achieves this, age and a dash of the flash equaling venerability in the pottery game. Old? How old? Ooooooold. Old before old was invented." (6)

Liar's Paradox

However, as the narration progresses it becomes increasingly evident that the bowl is not only lying to Rosa, but might not tell the truth about his semi-god-like status either. Although its tales are definitely engaging, one cannot suppress the feeling that there is no coherent concept or world-view behind them. The bowl, while it obviously gathered a great amount of knowledge about human nature, does not have answers to the fundamental questions of human existence. Its function is quite similar to the reason for its creation: storing, stocking up, and amassing various things in its inner void. So, essentially, the bowl does the same as its owners: it collects items. Throughout the novel, it characterizes people and their various body parts as types in an enormous catalogue; according to the bowl, there are two hundred and twenty styles of bosom, two hundred and eighty-four buttocks, and so on. Therefore, it does what humanity does: it collects data in the hope of establishing a pattern, still in the making, that is stored in an unfindable room that humanity is desperately "trying to book into". (75)

Furthermore, while the bowl escapes from telling the truth, it does not admit its own nakedness which it so desperately tries to hide. Its physical shape, its roundness and circular form that it never fails to emphasize with the "oooooos" (also being a popular synonym for orgasm), is more telling than anything else. Therefore, what the bowl tries to hide from Rosa is the same thing that it tries to hide from itself – the fact that it lies even to itself about its origin: the bowl was created by such humans whose exist-ence was centered around love, sex, and seduction. Consequently, the bowl

is incapable of observing reality objectively.

The language of the text also acts to condemn itself implicitly as a lie through the demonstration of arbitrary and therefore exploitable patterns (alliterations, rhythms of word sequences, repetitions, word coinages, etc). Fischer cleverly exploits the (supposed) anomalies of language's (supposed) rules by portraying a more complicated system (the universe), where they serve as a sweet distraction (just as sexuality in the novel). Analogously, the bowl admits its own dishonesty, "its authority on untruths" (13), thus deliberately commenting on the formidable, incomprehensible, and therefore pliable nature of history itself; admitting that any meaningful sense which could be decoded from it is merely a self-justifiably constructed pattern of personal truths and lies, its ways of interpretation and conceptualization depending on personal needs, wishes and intentions. Civilization is depicted as a constantly mutating lie to conceal chaos:

> The circus has fascinated people for so long. It is not about skills; it is about spreading yarns. That there is happiness. That there is achievement. That there is beauty. That there is resolution: a beginning and an end. It takes place in a ring. There are those who say a circle is a symbol of no beginning and no end; on the contrary, it is a symbol which shows that the beginning and the end can be anywhere. That is why it is such hard work. They are lighters against the darkness. They have to dispense with problems, crack the whip on misery. (112)

The perception of reality and history depends only on the nature of the invented rules applied, similarly to the supposed rules of language that the novel constantly tries to turn upside down, thus exposing their imperfection. The idea is crystallized in the following extract:

> There is one hunger nearly as great as the need for sleep, food, or water, but because its pangs are not so acute or debilitating as physical needs, its power is sometimes over-

> looked; the mind needs rules. Rules are the true rulers.… Nothing is more frightening than no rules; people will cherish the worst rules as long as they can avoid the prospect of a sky that spits in their face for no reason.… The propagation of rules is abetted by the prosperous flaunting of their rules as if they had something to do with their success. (39-40)

In this light, the bowl's activity is analogous to its circular shape, which can be read as an indication of what can be expected from its tales. The bowl's narration resembles the ongoing, perpetual circular motion that occurs in the case of the liar's paradox: "Everything I say is a lie." True and false are overwriting each other indefinitely.

History/Herstory/History

The bowl's tendency to fill up its inner void might be also interpreted as an allusion to a facet of sexuality that also seems to prevail throughout civilization, which is misogyny: women's degradation to an object of desire. Therefore, the text could be interpreted as a feminist critique of phallocentric society, but the narrative does not cease to act out its ambiguous nature. An implicit language game – buried under the debris of the explicit – namely, the oscillation from History to Herstory, is sewn into the already complicated tissue of the work by the introduction of misogyny and its classic example, the virgin/whore dichotomy, Rosa representing the former and Nikki the latter. Rosa maniacally tries to find Mr. Right, thus avoiding anybody who does not fit into her fantasy of male perfection, but her naive quest makes her the puppet of others. On the other hand, Nikki recklessly makes use of her body and exploits all people (male and female) to gain any kind of pleasure, whether sexual or financial; therefore, she is the perfect embodiment of the whore counterpart. The pot's access to past events in Rosa's life reveals her encounters with various stereotypical male figures despised by women: betrayers, beasts, or "infants", as iden-

tified by Judith Levine in her work on misandric stereotypes. Consequently, the text also introduces the notion of misandry. Their competing stories about womanhood – complemented by the tales of other additional female figures, such as Lump, the surreally bulky lesbian or Lettuce, the imbecile historian – are filtered through the narration of the bowl that is giving its account of human history devoid of all heroism, grandiosity, progress, and, most importantly, male superiority. The tales of these women and the stories of the past make up a highly different version of the history of (wo)mankind. Yet the whore figure of Nikki acts as a subversive agent that gradually undermines the depicted alternative history.

As Nikki's recollections of her wacky past filled with promiscuous, deviant sexuality begin to unfold, it also becomes increasingly suspicious to the reader that her stories are very similar to the bowl's tales. Nikki expresses her philosophy of life in the following way:

> I got a globe when I was a kid. I used to play with it, if you know what I mean, I didn't really know what I was doing but it was fun. Could be why I've always wanted to have the world between my legs. I stuck a knitting needle through it eventually, to find the place on the other side of the world, farthest away. It was never the same. That's what matters; to be on the road, to be the one, the girl wrapped in boys. (119)

In other words, Nikki does not mind being objectified, for she regards everyone as objects of desire, just as the world for her is an object to be used for her purposes. The bowl is an object that perceives the animate world around it as a collection of a tremendous number of objects, thus Nikki and the narrator have more in common than it seems. Their stories echo the same careless, stoical tone while the emergence of the very same random motifs in their stories, such as the frozen iguana, further help establish the assumption in the reader about their resemblance. With the onset of increasing doubt, the text begins to deconstruct itself: namely,

the narrative consumes its own fictionality by becoming increasingly meta-fictional. As the figure of the bowl and the character of Nikki start to merge, attaching Nikki and the bowl with the adhesive of feminist thought about women's objectification, skepticism emerges about the bowl's genderless status as well. This is precisely the moment when the subplot, that is, the pronoun game starts to circulate, canceling out the genderless narrator and replacing it with the figure of the implied author with male identity (or, to do justice to postfeminists, of the masculine counterpart of the culturally constructed binary opposition within the heterosexual matrix).

Interestingly, the text itself seems to play to the reader's increasing disbelief – the tales are gradually turning darker, more bitter, obscene, desperate, exhausting, repetitive, and, most importantly, more misogynistic. However, the callous but ambiguous game is played out to its very limit and twisted till it snaps at the climax of the novel. When Nikki confronts Mr. Annihilator, the death-figure arriving at last to assassinate her for her past sins, she says: "I was born a Nicholas not a Nicola." (205) The bowl continues: "Annihilator falls off his chair. He laughs until he cries. Nikki could be lying. But she could be telling the truth. I can't tell on this one." (205) The possibility that Nikki might be male subverts the whole previous interpretation of the text being chauvinistic or misogynistic, exposing the possibility of Nikki being a male acting out/performing a male fantasy about the female – thus the previously assumed misogyny transforms into misandry in an instant. What follows justifies the reader's assumptions about the ongoing, mean game the narrator (it/him) plays with the reader (him/her). Mr. Annihilator says: "Okay, here's my funny five minutes, I want you to take off your knickers, do a headstand and we'll pretend you're a vase, and I'll stick a flower into your puss." (206) Thus, Mr. Annihilator (the most sexist character in the book) turns Nikki, a possible male disguised as a female into an object, a vase, a bowl, a misogynist metaphor for objectified women. Here, Fischer's light mockery turns into sarcastic provocation, the identity of the narra-

tor being simultaneously "it" and "(s)he" in a regressing-progressing loop. History becomes Herstory to become History again, a constant interplay between two binary oppositions that prevents the actual telling of The Story; misogyny turns into misandry to turn into misogyny again, an infinite play with two sides of the same coin that is flipped into the air again and again, demonstrating chance, randomness, and circularity to be the only known rule of the universe.

Conclusion

It would be tempting to make more of this textual play found in the text and claim that the novel achieves gender deconstruction. However, the aim of the novel is not to question the existing categories of gender, but to play and essentially fool around with the reader's deeply rooted assumptions about gender roles, thus demonstrating their instability when they are channeled through a narrative process. Indeed, the text uses the conventional gender oppositions and traditional male and female stereotypes and leaves them almost intact until the very last moment. In the end, this kind of gender play is only one, albeit the strongest instrument in the novel's articulation of the uncertainty, absurdity, and underlying antagonism of existence. For even if we acknowledge the subversive tactics of the text from the very start, the impact of sacrificing the credibility of the narrator for this argument comes totally unexpectedly; letting the implied author appear in the background in such an ambiguous fashion in the middle of the text presumably spoils the narration. This phenomenon is unlikely to be a deliberately metafictional, grandiose gesture by the author – although, ironically, the question whether this metalepsis is intentional or not is unanswerable. However, it certainly appears as though the device of the genderless narrator was not sustainable, especially when it is surrounded by several stereotypically gendered characters. Accordingly, the real feat of the text does not lie in fooling

around with the reader but in its capability to convince him/her about the apparent impossibility to sustain an impartial and neutral attitude toward gender. The exceptional accomplishment of the novel is to work into its narrative this exhaustion and waning off of pretense, and building this experience into the climax of the novel. This apparent movement is what actually constitutes the subplot: the push and pull of gender roles in competition for narrating the story of all stories, the promise of which is indefinitely postponed by that very competition. In this light, the author's failure to create a faithful representation of impossibility is not a failure at all, for this – according to the novel – is humanity's failure at understanding. In sum, the novel is an elaborate expression of laughing nervously at the uselessness of despair over an unintelligible existence… or the very opposite of this statement, the other way round.

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MÁTYÁS BÍRÓ

Animate Objects in Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector* and in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

This article has been written with the aim of offering a new approach to Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector*, arguing that beside its more common reading as an amusing and witty novel narrated by an ancient bowl, it can indeed be read as a literary achievement highlighting a number of serious questions with philosophical overtones.

This is going to be done via the juxtaposition of the ancient bowl of Fischer's novel with John Keats's ancient urn appearing in "Ode on a Grecian Urn", a poem interpreted as typical and representative of the Romantic period. The examination of the two literary works will be based on a very specific element of Aristotle's philosophy which is going to be introduced later. Accordingly, throughout the investigation, the two focal points will be Fischer's and Keats's respective antique objects of art examined from a philosophical perspective. Various characteristics of the protagonist-like ancient bowl who is also the intradiegetic narrator of the novel, and the relevant features of the dramatically communicating ancient urn, also called a "character in [the] dramatic action" (Langbaum 45) of the "miniature drama" (Bate 135) will be compared.

However, two significant observations on the poem seem to be necessary already at this phase of the investigation. It is worth noting that this considerably late poem of the English Romantic period might arguably be seen as archetypal of Keats's oeuvre, having a strong effect not only on subsequent poetry but on the arts and aesthetic appreciation in more general terms as well.

Furthermore, its canonicity[1] seems to confirm it as a multidimensional, omnisignificant and equivocal piece of literature; and, as such, one that is endowed with what one would wish to call a gripping interpretative inexhaustibility. This can especially be observed in relation to the enigmatic ending couplet, which has been the most discussed and debated part of the poem.[2]

Admittedly, the comparison of two literary works from two such distinct eras might raise a number of questions and objections. In addition to the historical distance, the differences in terms of genre might similarly provide ground for questioning the present enterprise. Thus, the tasks of the upcoming sections also include providing justification for my approach.

A Contemporary Novel and Aristotle's Hierarchy

In light of some critical reviews[3] of *The Collector Collector*, the idea of linking the novel to any component of Aristotle's philosophy may appear extraordinary. This perhaps can be put down to the

1 According to David Harlan's definition of canonicity (qtd. in Stillinger 252), canonical works and texts can be characterised by multidimensionality, omnisignificance, indeterminacy and interpretative inexhaustibility, which make them permanently valuable.

2 For readings of the ending couplet, see my thesis: Bíró 24-26.

3 To present two of the various reviews, it is worth considering the rather negative opinion of Carole Angier from *The New Leader* arguing that "*The Collector Collector* shows traces of the genuine literary gift that made *Under the Frog* so promising. It is, at first, funny and clever. But it is empty. It is like a story-telling machine without a story, spinning through its motions faster and faster, about less and less, until it drives you insane. Well, it drove me insane. Perhaps you will feel differently." It is also worth quoting a positive review, for instance, the one of David Profumo from the Literary Review: "Deft, daft and devilishly entertaining, Tibor Fischer's third novel is narrated by an ancient piece of pottery that appears to know the secrets of the human heart … the texture of his prose makes for a deliciously slow read; one savours the flicker of allusion, the salty humour, the tug of the sardonic. Now droogish, now antique, his

fact that irrespective of the number of reviews about the novel, it can be observed that the vast majority (if not each) of them fail to point out and comment on the serious philosophical questions and dilemmas discussed in the text, such as to what extent communication in general can successfully express the illocutionary force of utterances, or, what anthropomorphic objects can and cannot convey through any kind of communication – issues that are undeniably explored in the book. Philosophy was not a distant item on Fischer's agenda even when he had been preparing for his second novel, *The Thought Gang*. An interview on *The Collector Collector* reveals much of his opinion about the benefits of reading philosophy as part of the preparation for writing. His words imply that in his own judgement, his spending six months reading philosophy before writing *The Thought Gang* was not worth the trouble.[4] His evaluation, however, sounds too pessimistic and disappointed. His philosophical background seems to have played a crucial under-

lingo ranges from Firbankian dialogue to the frankly macaronic. Alliterative cascades and verbal farragoes are much in evidence. *The Collector Collector* is as slender and exhausting as a supermodel." (Reviews are quoted from the back of the 1998 Vintage edition of the book and from <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/fischert/thecc.htm>. Accessed: 5 March 2010.)

4 I assume that Fisher's attitude toward the questions and comments on the writing method and preparation in this particular interview should be taken rather seriously, irrespective of their sometimes humorous nature. As Fischer claims in the interview with Ron Hogan, "I think research is a ritual; in my case, it seems to be something I have to do just to make sure there's nothing I can use. For *The Thought Gang* I spent about six months reading up on philosophy. I'd read some standard works, some Plato and so on, in the past, but since I was making the central character a philosopher, I thought I should be thorough. So I spent six months, and almost 99 percent of the reading wasn't useful in any way. There was only one percent that sneaked into the book. But the history of art reading I did for *The Collector Collector* was shorter, it was down to about three months before I saw the light. I think in the future I'll keep it even shorter, because I'm coming to the conclusion it's much easier and more authentic just to make it up."

lying role when he was writing *The Collector Collector*. Consequently, it will be argued that it was constructive and beneficial in the long run, perhaps even making the present philosophical approach justifiable.

In the context of this comparative article, a very specific segment of Aristotle's philosophy will be made use of, namely his ranking of the distinct forms of the beings of the universe in terms of their respective animate or inanimate nature. The reason for taking this hierarchy into consideration is the assumption that the ancient bowl and the "Grecian Urn" can in some way be inserted into this system. Before endeavouring to include the two objects of art in the hierarchy, it is indispensable, however, to be aware of the decisive features of the different levels.[5]

First of all, one of the fundamental characteristics of Aristotle's system is the differentiation between organic and inorganic entities, i.e., living beings and lifeless objects. Inorganic objects can be simply conceived as inanimate or nonliving matters, such as rocks or any other type of object merely consisting of matter. Organic entities, by contrast, are animate and characterised by possessing souls and being – in present-day terms – some sort of a biological organism. Organic entities are further divided into subgroups, such as plants, animals, and human beings. At the acme of the hierarchy there is the so-called Prime Mover who was not yet to be associated with any kind of god of any religion, and who is often claimed by Aristotelians to be the final source and principle of all movement throughout the universe. The key point and major merit of the Aristotelian hierarchy, from the point of view of the present paper,

5 Although occasional references will be made to influential American philosopher Arthur Lovejoy's book *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, it should be noted that the hierarchical system presented below, recapitulated by the author of the present article, is a considerably simplified version of that of Aristotle. Consequently, it is highly selective: it focuses only on those aspects of the original hierarchy that might prove to be of use during the subsequent comparison of the two objects of art.

however, is the fact that it classifies each of the various forms of being in accordance with their specific attributes and abilities.

According to Aristotle, rocks, along with other inorganic or inanimate things having merely the matter constituting them, are on the lowest level of the ranking. They cannot grow, reproduce or move; moreover, they cannot be described as possessing a soul or any of the five senses, as opposed to animals, for instance. On the next level of the hierarchy one finds nutritional plants such as grass, flowers and trees, to name but a few of them. Although their differentiation from inanimate objects can sometimes cause complications,[6] they possess the ability to grow and reproduce, and thereby they are the most primitive group of organic entities. The next distinct category is that of sensitive animals already possessing a sensible soul. It should be pointed out that the category of animals is different from that of plants as it is further divided into subcategories depending on the respective capabilities and attributes the particular members possess, in such fashion that all the lower capabilities and attributes are characteristic of any member of a higher level. At the peak of the category of "animals" there are those which can be characterised by (1) the capability of changing their position, (2) movement and (3) the full possession of all the five senses: vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the dividing line between plants and animals can frequently be rather equivocal, especially in the case of marine creatures.[7] On the fourth level human beings are to be found, who

6 "[Nature] passes so gradually from the inanimate to the animate that their continuity renders the boundary between them indistinguishable; and there is a middle kind that belongs to both orders. For plants come immediately after inanimate things; and plants differ from one another in the degree in which they appear to participate in life." (Quoted in Lovejoy 56)

7 "For the class [of plants] taken as a whole seems, in comparison with other bodies, to be clearly animate; but compared with animals to be inanimate. And the transition from plants to animals is continuous; for one might question whether some marine forms are animals or plants, since many of them are attached to the rock and perish if separated from it." (Quoted in Lovejoy 56)

already possess a rational soul in addition to the sensitive soul typical of animals. The possession of a rational soul allows human beings to amend physical desire (also characteristic of animals) with rational will, theoretical and practical reasoning, intellectual intuitions, and the capability to conceptualise past and future through imagination. The omniscient Prime Mover, of which the exact identity and interpretation with respect to Aristotle is rather obscure, occupies the top position in the ranking. In the context of the present paper, it is sufficient to sum up the Prime Mover's significance by pointing out its omnipotence through being the final source and principle of all movement all over the universe.

Having established the key concepts and features of the Aristotelian ranking of the distinct forms of being, one can now attempt to fit the ancient bowl and the "Grecian Urn" into the system. It is evident that, were the strictest manner of classification followed, it would leave no other option than the inclusion of the two objects of art in the category of inorganic and inanimate objects merely constituted by some kind of nonliving matter. Such rigid categorization, however, would fail to account for the very capabilities and attributes of the surrealistic bowl and the urn, respectively. As a consequence, it is reasonable to leave this option for the time being, and apply more flexible means of classification through which the various atypical abilities of these works of art can be highlighted. Yet how can one define the bowl's and the urn's respective places in the hierarchy? The answer is fairly obvious: practically, there is no way one could insert them into any of the five levels, since these objects of art seem to display particular capabilities possessed by various members of diverse categories above their supposed level (i.e., categories above the level of inanimate objects).

Hence, the remainder of the present article is aimed at accounting for the varied characteristics of the bowl and the urn by linking them, on the basis of their capacities explored in the novel and

the poem, to other levels of the hierarchy, meanwhile comparing and contrasting their surrealistic features as well as their ordinary "behaviour" and "mentality".

The Tension Between Human and Nonhuman Qualities

Both in the novel and in the poem, there is a central and tangible tension to be observed between the human features and the inherent nonhuman characteristics of the bowl and the urn, i.e., the display of such human capabilities as communication and the expression of human-like feelings, emotions, attitudes and opinions versus an innate fixity, coldness, stillness, muteness and an inability to change place and position. Therefore, the purpose of the present section is twofold. The various elements of the above-mentioned tension will be enumerated, and the construction of this odd duality will be explored. The two works of art will be juxtaposed in the hope of discovering those aspects of their extraordinary capabilities on the basis of which an attempt can be made to identify their respective multilevel placement in the Aristotelian hierarchy. Since the investigation is now targeting the capabilities on the human level, one evident focus of the following paragraphs is finding several human-like attributes of the two objects of art at various points of the poem and the novel. We will start with enumerating the nonhuman characteristics and discussing the general significance of the urn and the bowl. Thereafter, the rather equivocal human attributes will be examined.

First and foremost, what needs to be accounted for are the examination of the general interpretation of the urn and the bowl, and what they symbolise. It can be argued that the "Grecian Urn" is a "satisfying symbol of permanence" (Mayhead 79) embracing death and life and encapsulating the "duality of the tomb and the womb" (Blades 125) by its traditional use, and, essentially, by its shape. It implies and symbolises death since the ashes of dead

people were contained in urns; however, an urn can also be seen as a womb, being the symbol of life and generation. The bowl, in a somewhat similar – yet different – fashion, has also preserved remains of the dead. As the bowl narrates its rich historical past in a less elevated manner than the poem, the reader becomes aware of its various uses, such as its function as a "cinerary urn" (Fischer 5). Hence, it can be claimed that the two objects, in a parallel fashion, represent not only life and immortality through their round shape but death through some aspects of their use as well.

Moving on to the nonhuman characteristics of the two objects of art it is worth examining how they are introduced, respectively. As the poem commences, the urn is addressed as "still unravish'd bride of quietness," (Keats 1) emphasising that it is simply a mute object of art representing stillness and passivity.[8] As far as the bowl is concerned, on the basis of the onset of the chapter called "Rosa", one can have an idea about its attributes. The bowl, being the first-person-singular narrator of the novel, similarly reflects on its rendered passivity: "Now, I've been used: abused, disabused, misused, mused on, underenthused, unamused, contused, bemused and even perused." (Fischer 5) Consequently, it can be argued that both the urn and the bowl are represented as motionless, silent and lifeless objects, incapable of intervening in the events surrounding them. This way it is their passivity and inanimate nature which is emphasised. Thus, if one were unaware of the different human capabilities to be uncovered in the remainders of the poem and the

8 Note that in the context of the present comparison only certain points of my previous analysis will be considered. To draw attention to the dramatic equilibrium of the poem, resulting from the juxtaposition of nonhuman and human qualities, is undesirable at this point since human qualities are meant to be discussed later. "Stanza I commences with a paradoxical apostrophe. Keats's speaker addresses the urn both as a 'still unravish'd bride of quietness,' (1) – a mute object of art representing silence, stillness, passivity and visual art – and later as a 'Sylvan historian' (3) – implying story-telling, verbal communication, activity and poetry" (17). For the complete analysis of the poem see Bíró 16-26.

novel, one would wish to place the urn and the bowl on the level of inanimate objects. It has to be admitted, nonetheless, that irrespective of the subsequently revealed human capabilities of the two objects, the nonhuman aspects of their representations are present throughout the poem as well as the novel. Even toward the end of the poem, in the ultimate stanza, the vocabulary underlines the nonhuman quality of the urn: "O Attic shape! Fair attitude!" The words "marble" and "silent form" also indicate the fixity, silence and coldness of the urn. Correspondingly, the nonhuman quality and passivity of the bowl is preserved throughout the novel. The ancient bowl is represented in accordance with its inherited status or role as a mere passive object of actions. From the narration it becomes clear that it is completely conscious of its inanimate status: "I get to see the unflattering side of people.… We, the inanimate, are treated with disdain and are subjected to ordeals that few hamsters could face" (Fischer 19). Philosophically, the pets in the sentence probably refer to any sort of animate being. Yet the inanimate status is maintained even in the ultimate chapter, called "Djintamoonga and Wopilkara Surprise": "The auctioneeress arrives and I'm packed away" (213). The passivity is further underpinned by the use of the passive structure. As a result, it would be naive either to anticipate any enduring change in either object of art, or to claim that they have permanently become animate. What I would like to argue is that the urn and the bowl are temporally able to display the capabilities of animate beings. This will be the focal point of the forthcoming paragraphs.

On the Level of Human Beings

In order to provide an overview of the various human characteristics which can further be investigated afterwards, a number of different aspects should be taken into account. Feelings, emotions, opinions, attitudes, cataloguing, agency and, above all, communication are the major points that will be addressed. It is worth enu-

merating some instances when the bowl and the urn doubtlessly communicate – or at least interact – with others (i.e., they send messages in some way or another). Concerning the novel, it should be mentioned that since the bowl is the intradiegetic narrator, it mostly expresses its feelings, emotions, opinions and attitudes through addressing the reader, and not the characters of the novel. Therefore, one should not anticipate directly and dramatically verbalised apostrophe or instances of verbal communication such as the one uttered by the urn in the ending couplet of the poem.[9]

When examining various points of the poem which can – in some way or another – be related to the urn's communication, one can distinguish between explicit and implicit (i.e., clearly recognisable or underlying) elements on two different levels. Firstly, as far as the level of the textual components of the poem is concerned, the urn's explicit act of communication does not take place until the ending couplet, where it is overtly expressed. It is beyond dispute that the message: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'" is uttered by the dramatic character of the urn, as it is also underscored by the current standard version of the poem's punctuation. As for implicit elements on the textual level, there is an intricate network of various points throughout the poem where the ability of communication is suggested. The following words and phrases are significant from this point of view: "Sylvan historian" implying story-telling; "express", "tale" and "legend" implying both oral and later written communication; "pipes and timbrels" implying communication through musical notes and rhythm. These aspects are further intensified in the poem.[10] Moreover, the implication of the ability of verbal communication becomes fairly direct in the ultimate stanza: "to whom thou say'st". Secondly, regarding the level of the messages

9 It should be pointed out that the urn's dramatic character directly addresses humankind in terms of an aside.

10 For a detailed discussion of this issue see Bíró 16-26.

conveyed by the urn (i.e., their explicit or implicit nature and information value), it can be reasonably argued that there is not a single point in the poem where the urn's message can be considered as explicit information. Notably, there is altogether one point, the closing couplet, at which the urn explicitly communicates, but we need to make crucial distinction between an explicit act of communication and explicit messages. Although the urn explicitly communicates, its message remains enigmatic. The reason for this is the fact that the rather equivocal final message is implicit, since its perlocutionary force is unclear. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the ability of the urn's dramatic character to communicate with people – in terms of asides – allows it to belong to the level of human beings.

Concerning the bowl's communication, it can be argued that, on the textual level, the bowl neither takes part in, nor is linked to any kind of verbal communication, either explicitly or implicitly. There is not a single point throughout the novel when it would verbally address any character, nor is there anything that would imply or refer to the bowl's ability to communicate verbally. It should be noted that Odile's words "The vase is talking to me" (Fischer 87) should be taken metaphorically, not referring to any verbalised message, but rather the vision of the distant past projected for her by the bowl. Instead, readers encounter various instances throughout the novel where interaction between bowl and character is not linked to any means of verbal communication, nor does it depend on sight and hearing but it is achieved through touch.[11] The moment of the bowl's discovery of the possibility of facilitating communication through such surrealistic means has been accorded an elaborate narrative part in the novel: "This is

11 Note that Rosa is the addressed character in most of the cases. The moment of establishing or breaking up connection between Rosa and the bowl via touch is usually further emphasised by a specific textual method. Before the moment of establishment or break-up, words are written in an unusual way, containing multiple instances of the letter 'o', typically: "Ooooooff come the hands …. Oooooon come the hands." (Fischer 150, for instance)

a touch I've never experienced before; it is much more than a touch.… She's through, she can hear me. Rosa's in" (7). Fischer applies a variety of magic-realistic strategies so that the bowl will be able to communicate with Rosa whenever she touches it. The content of its messages ranges from such short moral stories as that of the "Undying Man" in the chapter called "Spoiling the Spoils" (64), through the reenactment of particular memories in Rosa's mind, by which she is taken back to years when she had been only twenty-five (97), to the projection, for the benefit of Odile, of such pictures of the distant past that our contemporaries have never seen: "As she lay in laudanum I played some great scenes for her: the greats greating, things no humans had seen for thousands of years, … creatures no one of her generation could ever see." (87) It should be pointed out that on the level of messages, sent either to Rosa and other characters, or to the readers, the bowl is typically explicit in contrast with the implicit urn. In conclusion, the bowl's communicative ability – similarly to that of the urn – accounts for its inclusion on the level of human beings.

Expressing feelings, emotions, opinions and attitudes towards various aspects of life is an undeniable part of the urn's and the bowl's respective "personalities". Such sentences as "I wouldn't like [Rosa] to make a habit of feeling my feelings" (10), or "Double humiliation and temptation on an alpine scale since I am turned upside down and fitted on top of the Gorgon. I consider a protest. This is asking a lot of me" (171) narrated by the bowl, are sufficient in themselves to support the idea of the bowl showing human feelings, emotions, opinions and attitudes. Such sentences sound as if they were formulated by a human being. Considering the urn, one can adopt an analogous stance, especially if the last three lines of the poem are taken into account: "Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st, / 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'" The phrase "a friend to man" informs the reader about the urn's attitude towards, and feel-

ings in connection with, human beings. Furthermore, it can also be argued that the last two lines express the urn's opinion, a categorical denial of providing any kind of explicit answer to, perhaps, the major dilemma of humankind: what might succeed life on earth? It is suggested by the vocabulary that the urn is aware of the mystery, yet all it seems to offer is the ambiguous ending couplet.[12] However, what is of primary importance from the perspective of the present article is the fact that the bowl and the urn show feelings, emotions and traits of logical thinking and reasoning through the expression of their opinions and attitudes. This again is an argument which allows their placement on the level of human beings.

The bowl's inclusion in the category of human beings can be traced back to an additional typically human habit: cataloguing. The bowl, in whatever environment, catalogues; it assigns numbers to objects, jobs, its collectors and their attributes, human body parts, types of feelings and emotions, and abstract phenomena such as lies or surprises, to mention but a few. It is evident yet it deserves to be pointed out that the idea of collecting various things and phenomena is indisputably connected to the title of the book. Hence, after having read the book and considered the title again, the human nature of the bowl might seem to the reader to have already been indicated in the very beginning. Since the bowl's cataloguing is extremely frequent and the range of its subject matter is rather extraordinary, only some of them can be highlighted. As for abstract issues: "To the ninety-one types of surprise I have identified, I now have to add a new branch, that of the thinking ceramic caught naked for the first time" (10); or, concerning body parts, "For irises, there are ten thousand, nine hundred and forty-nine principal hues. Rosa has mostly the grey I term mullet grey" (1). As cataloguing can

12 As the ending couplet has been the most debated part of the poem, its various interpretations cannot be discussed here with the critical attention it deserves.

also be considered as a kind of attitude to life human beings habitually tend to display, it can be argued again that this attitude explains why the bowl belongs to the level of human beings.

To summarise, both the urn and the bowl exhibit human attributes in terms of communication; the expression of feelings, emotions, opinions and attitudes; and cataloguing. On the basis of such human traits and capabilities one could reasonably argue that the most proper place of these two animate objects of art in the Aristotelian hierarchy is on the level of human beings.

Conclusion

In this article, an attempt has been made to prove that Tibor Fischer's third novel, *The Collector Collector* can, indeed, be read as a novel reflecting serious philosophical dilemmas. During the course of the investigation, the protagonist-like narrator of the book (i.e., the ancient bowl) has been compared and contrasted to the dramatic character (i.e., the dramatically communicating ancient urn) of Keats' poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn". In order to support the fundamental thesis of the article, a philosophical approach has been made use of which provided the basis of the juxtaposition of the two animate objects. Having introduced and explained the key features of Aristotle's ranking of the distinct forms of beings, I have endeavoured to define the respective places of the bowl and the urn in the hierarchy while examining their human-like attributes: communication, feelings, emotions, opinions, attitudes and cataloguing. The results of the investigation show that the most appropriate place of these two animate objects of art is on the level of human beings.

Finally, I would like to tackle one more issue. One may reasonably raise the following question: what is the ultimate message we are left with? It is common knowledge that since the Renaissance artists have feared oblivion (i.e., their name and oeuvre becoming completely forgotten) more than death itself. This special kind of

trepidation is still alive among artists, and it is very much there to explore both in the poem and the novel. It is worthwhile to examine the relation between art and the artist. But why are both works of art – the urn and also the bowl – presented as immortal entities? Evidently, a large number of possible explanations could be provided for this question. However, for the time being I would like to highlight only one, which is linked to the Keatsian "Negative Capability",[13] in a considerably simplified definition: the ability to project oneself into other entities and identify with them. The eternal qualities of the urn and the bowl undeniably have something to do with human projection; in the present case, with Keats's and Fischer's imaginations. I argue that there is a unique chain of immortality which has been developing since the respective moment of composition of the poem and the novel. The urn and the bowl are depicted as eternal objects with human qualities. Human qualities are projected into both works of art, and the chain of immortality seems to be built up in the following fashion. The inherently (in the context of the poem) eternal urn endows the poem itself with immortality – after all, since its composition in 1819, it has been read by innumerable readers and discussed by countless literary critics – and, if the poem is eternal, then so is the poet himself: his oeuvre as well as his name. Hence, we can argue that there is an apt analogy to be drawn between the trio of the urn, the poem and Keats and the trio of the bowl, the novel and Fischer, respectively. The bowl is an eternal object by definition in the novel, and as such it provides immortality to the novel itself. Bearing this in mind, let me raise the question again: what is the final message we are left with? The answer is to be determined by the future, but let us hope that the tendency shown by the trio of the urn, the poem and Keats will continue.

13 For the discussion of "Negative Capability" in light of additional letters of Keats relevant to the issue examined here see Bíró 2-12, especially 7-12.

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Appendix

John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

I

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men and gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

III

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and forever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

IV

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

V

O attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in the midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.[14]

14 In the poem's original manuscripts the penultimate and ultimate lines are punctuated in the following way:

Beauty is truth, – truth beauty, – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

In the poem's first publication in January 1820 in the *Annals of the Fine Arts*, the couplet is printed as:

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty. – That is all
Ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.

The next version (in July 1820) was published, however, with quotation marks around the first five words:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

as opposed to current standard versions, in which the entire closing couplet is between quotation marks supporting the idea that they are uttered by the urn:

'Beauty is truth, truth Beauty, – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

(Based on Strachan 152.)

Magdaléna Csóti

The Most Genuine of All

The Issue of Genuineness in Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector*

Through the analysis of the narrator's hate-driven relationship to Gorgon vases in Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector* (1997), I attempt to explore the issue of genuineness as represented in the novel. After a brief introduction of the narrator and the narrative structure of the novel, I will summarise the chapter entitled "The Endless Hatred (That Never Ends)." Then, by relying on the possible interpretations of this episode within the framework of the picaresque and the aesthetic notion of the copy, I will try to reconstruct the meaning of genuineness as referred to in the novel. Finally, by a very brief discussion of another story ("Moustache Chewers of the Past and Their Painters") I will try to complete the analysis by pointing out the process of systematic deconstruction aimed at fixed, historical notions attached to genuineness (like Truth, Beauty, and Originality).

The omniscient first-person-singular narrator of *The Collector Collector* is the collector referred to in the title: "a bowl …, thin walled, sporting the scorpion look of Samara ware that was the rage of Mesopotamia six and a half thousand years before" (6). The secret of the bowl's omniscience lies in its timeless existence as an inanimate object having a soul, and its mania for counting and cataloguing everything around it. However, the secret of its ever-being is revealed only slowly: it is an artefact that is capable of transforming itself from time to time – at will.

The narration is based on a classic structure in that it is organised within a frame story.[1] In the case of *The Collector Collector* the frame narration about Rosa and Nikki – the lonely art consultant (in search of Mr. Right) who has to determine whether the bowl is genuine or not, and the freelance liar and nymphomaniac trapezist – serves "only" as a pretext for the narrator to tell some of its random stories.[2] It is in this context that the story bearing the title "The Endless Hatred (That Never Ends)" is introduced after a picture "of a vase with a Gorgon's head on it" (32) appears in the frame narration.

In order to understand better the analysis that will follow, it is necessary to summarise briefly the indicated chapter (32-34). The story of "The Endless Hatred (That Never Ends)" takes place in an antique Corinthian workshop where the narrator, originally an old water pitcher, transforms itself into a "double-handled amphora with a Gorgon's face" (32). Immediately, it is admired, and attempted to be copied by every apprentice. Paradoxically, however, despite their feebleness, it is the *copied* Gorgons that get praised, and the *original* is not sold since everybody believes it to be only a poor *reproduction*. The devastating comment on the narrator, as stated by the potter of the workshop to the apprentice who managed to

1 Famous European examples are – among others – Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The most frequently quoted example of this structure, however, is the *Arabian Nights*, where the story of the insomniac king serves as the frame in which the stories of Sheherazade are contextualized and where the act of storytelling becomes a means of survival. Note that this aspect of the frame narrative also appears in *The Collector Collector* (for example when Nikki – one of the characters of the frame story – tries to gain time by recounting bizarre episodes of her life when faced with a hired murderer; see: 212-216). Nonetheless, this will not be further elaborated on in the present paper.

2 Only some of them, since the bowl claims: "supplied with sonic tools, I could chatter. I could chatter until this young lady [Rosa], her flat, and her city [London] were nothing but unremarkable dust" (6).

create a better vase, sounds as follows: "The lines on the vase [that is, the narrator] you discovered are clumsy and amateurish … whereas on this they have the strength of life." (33)

Later on in the course of the novel a reminder of this humiliation, one of the copied Gorgon vases appears in the frame story. The chance to take revenge is immediately grabbed by the bowl – yet again. As it explains: "the third-rate should be punished. Here's the score of crushed Gorgons: 1,648" (34). Consequently, after bizarre stories and events of all kinds, the hated rival is crushed into pieces – to the utmost delight of the bowl: "Gotcha. I hear, with satisfaction, Nikki's foot crunching another piece. There can't be many of them left. I'm patient. I'll get them. Gorgons, I'm coming for you." (218)

The fierce emotional involvement might seem puzzling: the pot states at the very beginning of its story that it is the original, if not the *inventor* of beauty itself (34), "so genuine, the genuine ones look like copies – which, of course, is what they are" (2). Supposing it genuinely genuine, one might wonder why the depositor of aesthetics would feel so bad about a copy or "a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy" (34). All the more so since the bowl also claims itself "Ooooooold. Old before old was invented" (6), and mentions the event that made it retire and take the position of passive observer.[3]

Despite (or perhaps owing to?) its omniscience and omnipotence (with regard to history, art, and aesthetics), the pot's acts reveal hostility mingled with seemingly inexplicable passion with regard to genuineness. If one considers the narrator to be what it claims itself to be – the *original* – then perhaps it is beauty and in this sense art as represented by the bowl that feels abused after being labelled "a cheap copy" (34) by the master of the Corinthian pottery shop. Regarding the human qualities attributed to the nar-

3 "I decided that shelf-sitting is the best policy after a nurse dropped a newborn infant into me, jar that I was at the time, and replaced my lid, expecting me to carry out the execution." (80)

rator – an animate inanimate fictional character – it would be tempting to conclude that the bowl's pride is so much hurt that it decides to "declare war" (34) and start finishing off the Gorgons: the *true copies*.

Yet, focusing on references to art and beauty in *The Collector Collector*, one might also consider another way of interpreting the "endless hatred": the Gorgon affair could be considered as a parodic performance in the attempt to deconstruct the notions of Originality, Beauty, Truth, the Ideal, and the Copy. From this point of view, it is the relationship of high aesthetics and high art to copies and fakes as well as beauty, truth and originality that is reflected upon in the subplot. Moreover, this deconstructive parody is played out by a most paradoxical figure: the bowl. On the one hand, as founder of the school of the Gorgon painter (13), it is enraged by the copy vases. In this sense, it can be argued that the bowl shares the idea of essential originality held by academics in favour of an aristocratic/pragmatic interpretation of what is considered art. (Radnóti 57) On the other hand, by its transformations, the bowl also represents the ever-changing nature of genuineness. It is in this same sense that it questions the notions of originality and truth, and moves ever closer to the notion of the fake; for, as it turns out, the bowl is an outright liar (18).

The bowl represents itself as an older than old inanimate object with a soul that has been used for so many things in so many forms that it is not surprising that it claims to have seen and lived it all. Yet it seems that the bowl has no proper past or history, since it is itself *history* and *time*, which implies that it tends to represent notions beyond the limits of human understanding.[4] However, this "notion" has a soul and is able to share its experience. Here lies

4 The bowl may remind the reader of the mysterious figure of the Earl of Saint-Germain, notorious character of European alchemy and esotery, who claimed himself immortal and told his stories about the famous or everyday scenes of history as though he had firsthand experience. Compare Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, where the earl is revealed to be a fake.

another paradox: the bowl is able to communicate but is incapable of telling the *truth*; it can only tell the *truths*: "Everything. Been it. Seen it. Mean it" (5) is the key comment for the reader's understanding of the narrator.

The bowl represents itself as a traveller of space and time and appears to have at its disposal an unbelievably large amount of information concerning the world we live in. In this sense the narrator – telling its stories and reciting its endless catalogues of everything that has ever existed – might remind the reader of the figure of the picaro. According to my hypothesis, a parallel can be drawn between the figure of the narrator and the literary character travelling around the world, gaining innumerable experiences.[5]

Hungarian literary critic and art historian Sándor Radnóti dedicated an entire book to the aesthetic problem of genuineness in art. In *Hamsítás* [Forgery] (1993) he also deals with the "picaro-phenomenon," and suggests that the figure of the picaro is mainly that of the fraud (32). As such, most of the time, he is the one who fakes, copies, and pretends himself to be (the proprietor of) the *original*, which he obviously is not. The picaresque itself is organised around the deeds of this figure "who inspects and criticises society and culture from beneath" (Radnóti 32) so that his opinion ultimately reflects the views of those excluded from higher social circles. Since the picaro is critical toward his surroundings, his humour is viciously ironic, which results in a series of comic and farcical scenes with the double intention of entertainment and moral education (Radnóti 34). Another important element of the

5 Fischer uses the same picaro-like, first-person-singular narrator in many of his novels where the narration is based on a frame-story structure. Ed, the antihero of *The Thought Gang* distracts and amuses the reader with his stories taking place at different times and places while travelling through France and robbing banks along the way. Though Oceane, the female protagonist of *Voyage to the End of the Room*, never leaves the house she lives in, her stories guide the reader from India through Spain to the former Yugoslavia.

picaresque is the picaro's tendency to change his masters and go into different services (Radnóti 38).

The bowl-narrator of Fischer's novel seems to match the above description. It has travelled and experienced a great deal, and its stories, told in a humorous, know-it-all ironic tone, can be interpreted as media for entertaining as well as for didactic purposes.[6] Moreover, the pot changes its masters from time to time, or more explicitly, it collects its collectors (as it is clearly indicated in the title of the novel) and goes into various services:

> Now, I've been used: abused, disabused, misused, mused on, underenthused, unamused, bemused, and even perused. Any compound of used, but chiefly used: shaving bowl, vinegar jar, cinerary urn, tomb good, pyxis, vase, rat-trap, bitumen amphora, chamber pot, pitcher, executioner, doorstop, sunshade, spittoon, coal scuttle, parrot rest, museum exhibit, deity, ashtray. (5)

In addition, the bowl is extremely critical towards the world, which is best expressed in its lists: "people I liked: thirty" (78). However, the pot's irony is matched with a highly egocentric world-view: it does not view high culture and society with the irony of the lower-class hero of the picaresque; on the contrary, it looks down on the world and on humanity as such from high above.[7]

6 For example, compare chapters "The Mummy That Cried for Earth" (37-43), "Spoiling the Spoil" (66-70) and "Odile" (77-89).

7 It is interesting to have a look at the picaresque figure of Nikki, one of the aforementioned figures of the frame story, who appears to be the human equivalent of the inanimate bowl in the novel. According to Ganteau: "Nikki - a real pícara dropping out of the blue … may be considered as a human hypostasis or correlative of the vase, since Nikki is the paragon of street-wisdom: though she is young, she has travelled widely, has met innumerable people, has tried her hand at a multitude of jobs" (12). Consequently, Nikki also has her collection of stories. Moreover, she has a natural inclination to lie (Fischer 14) and the ability to transform herself into different artefacts ("'I want you to take off your knickers, do a head-stand, and we'll pretend you're a vase, and I'll stick a flower into your puss.' Having done much wilder things,

Since, however, it makes its snobbery and critical condescension reassuringly explicit (see Fischer 6-7, 80 or 140-142), the bowl's interpretation as a picaro becomes problematic. The contradiction becomes even more direct if "faking" (as a key element of the definition of the picaro) is also taken into account: the bowl appears to be the original, whereas the picaro only *pretends* to be one. A similar dilemma has appeared already in earlier discussions of the Gorgon affair. Yet if we presume the bowl's passionate involvement to be a mocking performance, then the contradiction seems to weaken.[8]

Taking the dichotomous is/pretends, true/false, original/fake elements of the picaro's definition, one might realise that the figure (of the bowl as well as that of the picaro) can successfully be paralleled to that of the forger. According to Radnóti:

> Forgery as an applied art explicitly builds upon another work of art, or the attractiveness of a less-known style, flattering the onlooker precisely by *pretending* to be *"the one."* Yet, the history of forgery is a history of counterfeiting … museums are still packed with artefacts of doubtable origin, with unidentified fakes… (37)

In spite of the fact that the bowl claims itself genuine, it is an artefact who(se origin) is unidentifiable due to its constant transformations. So, in this sense, the reaction against the Gorgon vases, imitations based on the model that is later rejected as unworthy, proves wholly unreasonable.

Reading "The Endless Hatred (That Never Ends)" chapter more closely, one might ask the question why the imitation of a work of

Nikki complies…" (Fischer 212). "He [also] makes Nikki roll onto her front and, arching herself to his instructions, she clasps the back of her legs. He places some sugar cubes on her, presumably making her into an approximation of a bowl." (216)) All this seems to indicate that there is a strong correlation between the two characters; an interesting parallel that, however, will not be pursued further here.

8 Compare Baldick 45, 130, 183, 185.

art is considered as insulting counterfeiting in an era when copying is a widely accepted practice.[9] What happens in the Corinthian workshop is the birth of a consumable artefact that matches antique Corinthian common taste. As Radnóti suggests, "fakes are usually popular variations on the theme [that is, on the original], re-created according to current tastes" (57). Even if the bowl is accepted as ancient and omniscient, its immediate reaction is absolutely incomprehensible in the Corinthian context.[10]

It is at this point that the history and origin of a work of art should be considered. Both history and origin are decisive in that they are "indispensable sources" to the experiencing and understanding of the work of art itself (Radnóti 61). According to Radnóti:

> In a broader sense, the originality of a work of art – besides representing the material similarity of the work of art with itself, and the nonsimilarity of it with everything else… – proves its *historical credibility*. The original work of art … *contains its story* which is not finished with its creation. Deterioration and restoration; ... recontextualization; its changing purpose and importance; and the numerous traditions linked to it all belong to the [story of a] work of art. (66-67)

Fischer's collector collector, though doubtless a work of art, lacks the quality to bear "material similarity" with itself. In spite of the fact that it is always some kind of a ceramic, it has no constant "credibility," no original place or purpose, no proper range of interpretations or retraceable traditions. The bowl appears to lack all the properties that would make it a genuinely original work of art – which, in turn, suggests that there is an inconsistency with regard to the narrator's dearest topic, that is, its own genuineness.

9 Radnóti suggests that up until the 18th century copying was not considered forgery. (52)

10 To be precise, it reflects ideas of the 19th (and 20th) centuries that definitely did not exist at the time of the first, ominous Gorgon affair: the notion of pure originality and individuality in art was canonized only much later.

From this point of view, the bowl's involvement with the copied Gorgon vases is confusing, for – contrary to the narrator's stance – these latter works of art bear absolute similarity to themselves and have their own history and tradition. Yet the pot seems to stick to its idea of genuine genuineness, and to the four basic elements of forgery-criticism as stated by Radnóti (69): first, the copy (that is, the fake) pretends to be similar to something with which it has no relationship at all; second, it appropriates the individuality of the original; third, it "steals" the original work of art's novelty; and fourth, it assigns a history to something that has none. In his essay on the technical reproduction of the work of art, Walter Benjamin accentuates the idea that as a result of (manual or mechanical) reproduction, the work of art is robbed of its *aura*, that is, of the sense of its "here" and "now" which provides it with its true essence of "originality." (305) Like Radnóti, Benjamin also states that history and tradition play an essential role in the construction of the notions of beauty and originality. (309)

Contrary to other works of art in the novel, the collector collector bears its aura hidden on the "inside": in its knowledge – which has little to do with its surface, that is, with its "bowlness" or "artefactness." Since, as it has already been made clear, the pot represents a notion (be it time, history, art, or aesthetics – or all of them at the same time), its engagement in the "war-of-the-original-against-the-copies" is highly ironic. Yet, this is what we were to prove: the bowl ironically turns the notion of Truth, Beauty, and Originality inside out.

What the bowl says about the Gorgon affair at the end of the novel is: "Truthfully, I don't care that much, but I have to convince myself that I do. Without grudges, what would there be to do? Without passions you'd just be sitting on the shelf, ceramicking along." (218) This confession subverts any attempt to give explanation of the Gorgon affair. Yet the key to the whole story lies in this perplexing confusion: the bowl pretends to be the original

which, however, it is not and cannot be since it is in constant transformation and is pretending to be at war about being original. To make this point more explicit, let us cite Radnóti again on the notion of forgery: "Forgery suggests the modern idea of non-exchangeability ... which it parodies with the pre- and/or(?) post-modern idea of interchangeability." (72)[11] Though the citation is organised around the idea of faking, if we replace the word "forgery" with the words "the bowl," then we get a clear description of what lies underneath the Gorgon affair in Fischer's *The Collector Collector*: the bowl embodies the postmodernist attempt to deconstruct the notion of logos as expressed via "ultimate" ideas like Truth, Beauty, Original, or Copy.

However, the Gorgon affair is not the only story which is aimed at the subversion of Truth, Beauty, Originality, or the Copy. In his essay "Re-vision as Zapping: Tibor Fischer's *The Collector Collector*" (2000) Jean-Michel Ganteau calls attention to the story of "Moustache Chewers of the Past and Their Painters" (183-194) in which each day Lucas the painter starts painting the picture of the following day:[12]

> He sat down and painted the sea for the next day[,] a grey sea and clouds in the shape of icy reptiles. Sure enough, the next day the painting was a perfect match for the weather (Fischer 191). By moving from retrospection to projection, the passage formulates a radical comment on the model/copy, reference/mimesis relationship. What used to precede succeeds, and it is the copy that now assumes precedence over the original, the imitation that anticipates the model… (Ganteau 7)

11 The idea might remind the reader of M.C. Escher's lithographs, Hofstadter's "strange loops", or system theory (Maturana, Luhmann etc.).

12 Before the day he died he "painted a picture of himself hanging from a bough, portrait of the artist as a corpse in a copse" - a reference to Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (Compare Fischer 191-192)

Thus, we have come full circle: the bowl offers the reader a story in which it is not the *original*, but rather the *copy* that acts as a *model*. It is no longer the picture that represents aspects of reality, but it is reality that "acts" according to the picture. Roles and functions regarding the creation and perception of art, of meaning and reality, of the original and the copy, are confused. Finally, the only possible way to deal with this seemingly chaotic image of the world is to accept that meanings are in constant flux so that all interpretations may be valid at the same time.[13]

To conclude, the emotional involvement of Fischer's collector collector in the issue of genuineness serves as a pretext to keep itself (as well as the reader) mentally and spiritually awake. Thus, the bowl seems to prove the hypothesis, as suggested in the introduction, about there not necessarily being any Sense or Meaning. Through the investigation of the Gorgon affair, relying heavily on the narrator's presumed analogy with the figure of the picaro and the fake, paradox and irony have been revealed as means or attempts at a postmodern deconstructionist move aimed exactly at communicating the idea that a whole range of interpretations may be valid at the same time and that in this sense truth does not exist – only truths do.

13 Fischer uses further devices to challenge the issue of genuineness. On the one hand, the whole novel is about the narrator's narration that includes others' narrations (of Rosa, of Nikki, of Lettuce…) in which, in turn, other narrations might appear, like the stories of the mad poets in Odile's narrative (81-88), many of which are concerned with the undermining of the notion of writing and even of storytelling (for instance through the figure of the poet writing poems in invisible ink). On the other hand, the pot's mania for creating lists of words and its preference for symbols unexplained (the earrings, the frozen iguanas) aim at the deconstruction of Meaning itself.

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Ildikó Farkas

Chance versus Control in Tibor Fischer's *Good to Be God*

Introduction

As obvious as it may seem, the title of Tibor Fischer's latest book *Good to be God* inevitably sets the reader's mind thinking. The possession of some sort of magic or transcendental power has always been an object of human interest. Being human might be seen as a gift in comparison with other species that lack the intellect to be self-reflective, to comprehend the notion of past and future and to create culture and civilisation on the basis of experience, memories and anticipation. However, humanity also appears to be fallible and in an inferior state of existence compared to that of divinities with eternal power not bound by physical limitations. Thanks to the coexistence of inherent aspirations for development and the intellectual capacity in humans, man has always been trying to reach a more supreme level of being. Moreover, we tend to admire and respect, though also fear, any phenomenon of a seemingly unearthly nature, which provides people involved in the creation of these phenomena with the highest prestige.

Ultimately, having power over all other beings is the most favourable alternative for the novel's protagonist, Tyndale Corbett, who desperately attempts to achieve some success in his so far only moderately fortunate life. In his situation, lacking any perspective, he is determined to make people suspend their disbelief and recognise him as a miracle maker, eventually gaining more power than his most successful business competitors would ever be able to. However, instead of providing a recipe for seizing control over the

rest of humankind, Tyndale Corbett's story, which starts with the relatively innocent-looking step of stealing another person's identity, develops into an exploration of ontological questions of humanity, such as: who am I, who could I be, to what extent can human beings be in control of their own lives, let alone the lives of others, or to what extent can the limits of human existence be pushed?

The Protagonist

The protagonist, Tyndale Corbett, is a man of considerable self-awareness, experience and insight, with an extreme lack of luck. Being in his forties, down one marriage and several unsuccessful attempts to build a prestigious career as a salesman, Tyndale is a disappointed and bitter man with – by him much hated – average skills. In some respect, Fischer's anti-heroic protagonist does fit in the tradition of postmodernist characters who "express exhaustion and display the resources of the void" replacing the modernist ones "remaining tragically heroic" (Selden 177). Although in an interview Fischer claims that the definition of an anti-hero is a highly subjective task and "things like character I think are a more visceral, instinctive matter" (Györke), Tyndale's character represents the abandonment of great heroic features of the protagonist in postmodern fiction. Completed with the "rejection of the traditional aesthetics of … 'uniqueness'" (Selden 177), this protagonist embodies the Everyman, somebody who is no more special than most human beings around, which makes the central theme of the book, his high ambitions to become God, all the more interesting.

Despite his average attributes, Tyndale can venture on the most unbelievable quest to ascend to divinity. He is not particularly gifted in any sense, still, he possesses a well-beyond-the-average intellect that provides him with a filter for his observations about himself and the world. The discrepancy between his outstanding observant and empathic abilities and his lack of outstanding talent in anything

practical leaves him discontented with his life. Moreover, his resigned countenance is further justified through the novel as his childhood and former adult life unfold in his reminiscences.

Memories have an important role in the novel. While they do not create a plotline parallel with the events happening in the book's present, the episodic reminiscences help the reader create a fuller picture of Tyndale's personality and the reasons for his decisions and changing characteristics. Normally, there are two phases of personal development; that of growing from innocence to experience, which can be compared to Tyndale's life until the beginning of the novel. The first step could be described as the innocence of the child who, devoid of any evil, calculation and prejudice, trusts the world, trusts people and assumes that there is order and good things will happen. The second step is when the child learns more about the true workings of the system and about themselves, and their ideals are shattered to be rebuilt on a different basis – if they can rebuild them. However, although the process obviously starts in childhood, it is not necessarily tied to age. This is particularly true in the case of Tyndale, who started reflecting on his own existence and recognised himself as an outcast at a very early stage.

Fischer is extremely resourceful in representing a character's life in grotesque tones by the addition of subtle details that deprive that life of all dignity and make it sound rather ridiculous. Mike, for instance, works for a company producing putt returners, Tyndale's former wife's new companion is in ladybird breeding for pest control, while Gert, one member of the congregation at the Church of the Heavily Armed Christ, established a business making parachutes for champagne corks that open when the bottle is opened so that the corks descend gently to the audience's pleasure: "Gert is the only regular who might be described as successful, since he has a business making parachutes for champagne corks, so that the corks float down to widespread delight after being popped." (Fischer 169) However well-off Mike and the others might be, these characteristics really do undermine the loftiness of their success:

ordinary elements mix with strikingly unusual ones in every case, and the grotesqueness of the situation makes success a very relative term in the novel, emphasising the lack of grandness in human life:

> I have nothing against Dee's new man. He runs a business breeding ladybirds, which initially made me think he was mentally ill, until I learnt that gardeners buy them for pest control. He has a staff of twenty. He's never going to be rich in the having-your-own private-army way we dream of when we're young. But he has enough for a foreign holiday twice a year and a big house with a garden. Dee would prefer to have a senior banker to brag about, because the comic element to breeding ladybirds is unavoidable, but you can't have everything. (Fischer 139)

One of the reviews of the book writes unfavourably about these grotesque elements as being out of proportion:

> Fischer seems unable to prevent himself from suffocating a promising comic idea by pushing it too far.… A monkey in a nightclub is just about believable; a monkey operating the turntables is stretching it a bit; but a monkey with a gun is really only there to set up the inquiry "does the monkey have a licence for that?" and the inevitable punchline, "It's a monkey, it doesn't need a fucking licence." (Hickling)

However, these images entailing factual elements interwoven with hardly believable ones are, for instance, commonly accepted in Marquez's works as distinguishing features of magic realist writing. Magic realist components are also to be found with Fischer; having been influenced by two different cultures by birth, his double identity has influenced his works, as happened to other postmodern authors who had the same experience and might have been influenced by a less mainstream cultural community such as Hungary in Fischer's case, India in Salman Rushdie's or Japan in Kazuo Ishiguro's. Fischer even claims in an interview about the seemingly imaginary places in his novel *Voyage to the End of the Room* that "they do exist. I've been to both. Everything in *Voyage* is true, even

if that's hard to believe." (Györke) For the postmodern man, these idiosyncrasies can account for an individual, rather than cultural isolation; for one's inability to adapt to norms.

The monkey with a gun may be incomprehensible for one, but could make just as much sense as any other phenomenon, even if they are not to be seen equally frequently. In fact, the whole book is based on the exploration of an idea unimaginable to the rational mind: a man's attempt to become God. Moreover, the juxtaposition of such elements in the novel with other, equally unbelievable ones that people still tend to worship, such as the Lama's demagogue speech, may also raise awareness of the fact that just because a phenomenon is beyond the boundaries of everyday experience, it does not necessarily mean it cannot happen.

A similar, very exceptional characteristic describes Tyndale: he is doomed because of his dislike of chocolate (Fischer 158). Again, this is a most unlikely characteristic, especially for a child, yet it is as possible as anything else on a statistical basis. However, it is the rareness of chocophobia that makes it almost ridiculous; therefore, nothing could be more segregating for Tyndale as a child who has to see the difference between the ideals and his bitter experience at a very early age. Thus, being an outcast is inherently built into Tyndale's self-image, which prevents him from feeling at home among "normal" members of society.

Although he cannot afford the luxury of being an innocent child, he does show the two phases in his personal development in his later life. He possesses typically 21st-century, enlightened Western culture guts, a conscious yet instinctive self-assertive force that refuses to yield to authority or be affected by hierarchy. This is proved by his lack of susceptibility to the Lama's manipulation, for instance:

> "What sets us Tibetans apart is our belief in reincarnation lineages and our tradition of termas and tertons," explains the Lama. Tertons, being scripture-drivers who find long-lost or long-hidden scriptures, terma, mind-treasure, I find it hard

> not to laugh. Not that I've ever paid much attention to religion, but I know from casual television absorption history is cluttered with maniacs brandishing updates and shopping lists from God. (Fischer 23)

Similarly to many among the audience, Tyndale is also seeking for certainty in life, as all he ever believed in has been betrayed, yet he cannot be successfully targeted by manipulation. His self-assertive force makes him believe that he should succeed, having tried to devote all his energy and abilities to achieving his aim and to live decently as he was taught he should until he fails to live up to the assumed potentials and feels betrayed by "the system". This is the second phase, when he no longer believes in orderly success and realises that the key to being successful lays in one's personality, something given and unchangeable rather than consciously controllable.

This feeling of a lack of control over his life and the impossibility of living it decently in accordance with current social norms encourage Tyndale to change his attitude and become somebody else – literally. Taking the identity of another person and getting away with it without any problem is only a prelude to his being able to become anybody, ultimately God Himself. However, God is slightly different from any person, given that He is superhuman. Yet Tyndale is in a situation where he has nothing to lose; as he cannot return to his old self any more, he can take bigger risks.

It is an extremely powerful state of mind which emerges gradually as a result of subsequent events blurring the clear-cut boundaries between the rational and the irrational, creating a sense that anything is possible. This process is represented by Tyndale's narration (supported by some highly unlikely, almost magical occurrences in the novel), which has some persuasive power that might make the sceptical reader less reluctant to believe in the possibility of his unbelievable quest. Although Tyndale is a first-person-singular narrator, therefore possibly unreliable, there are conversations cited word-by-word to make his story more credible. Moreover, Fischer's

witty and sarcastic style is lent to the protagonist, whose insightful remarks reveal considerable self-awareness and self-criticism, which also contribute to the impression of the narrator's reliability:

> In the kitchen, I prepare myself that staple of lone males, toast. When I go up to my room and check, they're still at it. I could get very angry about my ex-wife renting the house opposite my abode from the billions of rentable homes on offer. I could fall prey to the suspicion that she's doing it deliberately, but for the knowledge that she'd be more horrified than me to discover our proximity. Somehow the total absurdity of the episode makes me feel this is a provocation, that this has been engineered by the universe to wind me up. Anything is better than chaos. And if bad luck doesn't upset you, it's not really such bad luck; naturally that's not such an easy trick to pull off, but there you are. (Fischer 138)

Another of the reviews hammered Fischer's novel for being "a weirdly empty pleasure" with "minimal plotting, designed to allow the inclusion of as many discontinuous set pieces as possible", "a sitcom-cast of wacky characters … and an end that's more a halt than a conclusion." (Martin) Taking into consideration the plot of the novel, I can hardly agree with this criticism as the intellectual contemplation of identity together with all the other concerns of 21st-century man, such as losing all reference points in the external world, trying to make sense of one's existence, exploring the meaning of happiness or the role of love as general human themes provide the text with meaningful content. In addition, the comment "tiny slices of trenchant observation on every page: it's an object lesson in how to talk entertainingly about nothing in particular" (Martin) might be read as a compliment for a postmodern work of art. On the basis of the two most influential theories of postmodernism "concerning the dominance of the sign and loss of the real, and a scepticism towards the 'grand narratives' of human history and progress" (Selden 179), virtuoso linguistic achievements with little message are justified in such literary pieces. Martin's critical

comment is unmistakeably misfired and self-contradictory, as "trenchant observation" is the key to discovering the essence of any phenomenon.

Moreover, even if a proper plot and conclusion were missing, a postmodern work of literature could not in any case be blamed for this. Yet Fischer does not even substitute a halt for a conclusion when he suggests, though carefully, the possibility of self-fulfilment and happiness for his characters in the future; he rather remains consistent about the attitude towards man's grand hopes for success represented in the novel. Furthermore, the ending also represents the essentially human characteristic of never giving up hope, not even in a fragmented world where hardly anything is reliable as a reference point other than the person him- or herself; where the only certainty might be the unpredictability of events. This loss of footholds in the external world inspires Tyndale's self-exploration resulting in the ultimate ontological question, "Who am I?", which is expanded into "Who can I turn into?" and, due to the high ambition triggered by failure, finally to: "Could I be resurrected?"

Religion and Faith

Before embarking on the elaboration of Tyndale's attempts to become God, another way of justifying the choice of the "religion business" might deserve some attention. The extended ontological dilemma and the need for exploring the limits of his existence originate from another source as well. Namely, Tyndale is gravely concerned about his lack of success in his personal and professional life, which he attributes to the lack of delivery of results promised in case he acted the right way. This breach of the social contract turns him into a disappointed and frustrated man displaying little moral consideration. He becomes reckless and puts all his eggs into one basket. If he cannot provide himself with a stable income through a decent and honest life, he must dismiss decency and honesty. This conclusion seems to be beyond the level of social and moral decency and

Tyndale is convincing in claiming that it is justifiable to check out of the system if the system does not follow the rules.

Moreover, his observations about religion are the cause and not the effect of his decision to try to become divine. He can see that religion is nothing like any other "business", because "you're selling nothing" and "joining the God squad is about being convincing when you say "it'll be all right" in reply to the question "do you think it'll be all right?"" Furthermore and most significantly, "Religion never has to deliver, it only has to promise to deliver. Delivery is always round the corner." (Fischer 29)

Since Tyndale worked as a struggling salesman, it is an especially attractive position for him to sell promises you never have to realise; therefore, he takes neither risk nor responsibility by choosing the "religion business". Religion, whether or not based on real faith in a divine power, rather means following a set of rules for the promise of being relieved of your sins and provided with the rewards you need. The needy, the sick, the hopeless, or unsuccessful, insecure people are the best targets to be involved in any religious attachment as they are desperate enough to look for a patronising power that can provide them with a responsibility-free, non-decision-making, receptive position. The potentials, the promised results that may never be relevant during earthly existence are the perfect setting for those who do not want to take a step forward, either because they do not know what to do or because they find it easier to be "fed" instead of thinking and deciding on their own. Tyndale must be right in this case: "laziness always wins". Faith is a fervent belief that you insist on in spite of all hardship, while religion, when not unanimous with faith, is rather the convenient emergency exit in case of a lack of principles or belief, offering a constructed system and prefabricated rules. Therefore, religion does not necessarily involve any responsibility on either side, offering the participants a position with extended potentials in comparison with the achievement-oriented world of other businesses.

Human Divinity

Tyndale's idea about how to be God is puzzlingly delineated and puzzlingly different from what one might imagine to be the recipe. In his view, the road to eternity requires a Church, saying to people what they want to hear and, ultimately, it is also necessary to pull off some miracle. However, this, I would say, does not reach beyond human capacity – except for the miracle, although illusion is easy to create and people are more than keen to fall for an illusion and believe that the impossible can happen just as they watch illusionists' shows or listen to preachers promising an unbelievably favourable outcome for every individual. Tyndale knows that the ultimate means for a mortal being to achieve superhuman status is manipulation. He relies mostly on his manipulative power over people; his observant eye and mind are to his advantage, but their test is their application in manipulating others, which Tyndale manages to do. Thus he finally chooses a career that he has beyond-the-average skills for. Yet he lacks the sufficient amount of evil: however hard he tries, he lacks the total lack of moral values which could make him a very good manipulator, like the sofa stealer or the Fixico sisters.

His problem is that becoming divine in his view cannot fit in human society. When a human being tries to act as if they were superhuman, they will inevitably fail, as the one component missing to complete the mission is the power one can only pretend to have, but may rather not even do that. The main distinction between humanity and divinity is in their essences; a thing is either human or divine, and, therefore, being one excludes being the other at the same time. Thus, what I would call "Human Divinity", what Tyndale is aspiring to establish, is doomed to failure. He is unquestionably aware of the fact that transubstantiation is impossible, yet he has a strong determination to push the boundaries of his existence beyond its limits and until very late in the book, until his first

attempt at a proper miracle, some events – most notably the ones interwoven with magic realist elements – imply that Tyndale's quest might be successful.

What is sensible turns out to be relative, and the borderline between the rational and the irrational cannot be clearly drawn – especially since their definitions are highly subjective. If, for instance, a monkey DJ with a gun can exist, it creates the impression that there is little reason for regarding the idea of becoming God as impossible. However, at the point of miracle making Tyndale's original concept fails and becoming God turns out to exceed his limits of being human. This is obviously outside the world of the novel but it transforms into a potential alternative within the story. Therefore what seems to be the same way for him and other spiritual manipulators in the novel are two profoundly different approaches.

What can be successful, and what, unfortunately, seems to be inherently human, is evil manipulation of people who are craving for hope, as they are the most likely to be entrapped. As most kinds of manipulation originate from the intention to take financial advantage of the misery of the needy, and, as various forms of religion prove, in consumer society even faith has been commercialised, religion can be a great means for tricking people out of their money. Yet this is not what motivates Tyndale; after all, he seeks a job that can provide him with a more decent living than selling light bulbs. Initially, he is only concerned about the fact that this business allows for the most space for his experimenting with pushing his limits to their extremes with the least risk involved. Feeling ruined as a human being, he does not differentiate between moral and financial success; he only aims at success in any form. No moral issue interferes with his plans as he has just abandoned all, but this does not ultimately mean that immoral issues would infect his thoughts. Although, at first, he does not lay down his principles of distinguishing between the targets of his manipulation, he never abuses really unfortunate people (meaning the sick,

not the stupid ones); moreover, he shows much care for those who are even more unfortunate than he is, such as Napalm or the Lockett's leukaemia-stricken daughter, Esther. As opposed to the majority of cases (as represented by the Fixico Sisters or Gert), Tyndale's example proves that, even in this business, true morals can work their way to the surface and make a difference. He might not be conscious about this at the beginning, but at one point, towards the end of the novel, he explicitly declares his moral stance: "As far as I'm concerned there's nothing wrong with misleading healthy, employed individuals and taking their money in exchange for illusions, because a good illusion is a beautiful thing, but it's wrong to feed off the sick." (Fischer 246)

By this point, I believe, Tyndale has gone through some changing and although he tried hard to seem to care little about anybody at the beginning, he does reveal a power of judgement and a system of values, distinguishing between right and wrong on a moral basis, and turns out to be much more good-willed and much more of a human being than many others around him. His purpose is essentially different from theirs. Although he tries to fulfil his aim through other people, his quest is all about him; his underlying motivation is his self-definition, or, rather, redefinition. Having always been an "outcast", a non-belonging entity, "in the wrong room, on the wrong planet" (Fischer 238) – thus doomed to failure in establishing a valid membership in human society – now he wants to become omnipotent, he wants to experience the ultimate success: the state where there is no chance of failure. This is only possible for him if he ascends above the human level because he has failed as a social human being.

Still, it is a lonesome position, like that of all manipulators. An outcast will always remain an outcast, especially if they create a separate, one-member universe from where they can make people love them. This might work out for a divinity, but is an off-balance situation for humans, threatening to collapse at any time, like in the case of the most well-known manipulator in literature,

Shakespeare's Iago – or the Fixico sisters, who are quite similar in character. Although it might be said that the evil motive and means of manipulation bring inevitable doom on Iago and the Fixico sisters, it is at least as much justified to say that a person isolating themselves in a self-sufficient universe is contrary to human nature, and that existence in that state is not possible. However little malevolence his motivation might contain, Tyndale would have been unhappy with the almighty power he was supposed to possess. As life would not be all right after "finishing this school" or "marrying this woman" (Fischer 139), embodying God would not guarantee success either. This leads to a more general question raised by the novel: what success depends on and whether humans can influence their fate to any extent.

FAILURE and SUCCESS: Determination, Chance, Luck and Control

Tyndale has remarkable self-knowledge by the age of forty-something, and he is not reluctant to face what he has learned about himself. The major characteristic of his personality is being an outcast. The early recognition of this condition results in the necessity of his exploring further who he really is. As nothing seems to be under his control in his life, he cannot avoid having to ask questions and figure out what order applies in the world if the one he was taught does not. Through his search he concludes that chance and luck are major elements that play a role in life and some people, such as himself, simply lack any luck. The representation of this to Dave by a series of unlucky events justifies Tyndale's theory to Dave, to the reader and even to Tyndale himself – although he obviously does not need any more conviction.

The state of being thrown in the middle of the great whirl where there are no set rules and not much can be done to control what will happen next is typical of the postmodern man. However, humans cannot live without some order; therefore, they have to

create reference points for themselves. One way to do so is to rely on the help offered by religions. Nevertheless, illusions cannot be sufficient for those who see through manipulation, and this awareness of the futility of searching for a point of reference in an all-relative world may invoke suicidal thoughts, as happens to Tyndale. He, however, is not strong enough, or is too lazy, to accomplish such a deed, and he resorts to accepting his being a failure in any case as a reference point. If nothing else, at least unpredictability is predictable.

Tyndale cannot find out why a miracle has worked out for Gert, but not for him who worked hard to carry it out. He cannot find the answer to why nothing he plans turns out as it is planned; therefore, he cannot explain the reason for his failure to become God. However, his success does not depend on being able to become God, as he realises later, but on finding the ultimate reference point in the world, something that will always happen the same way: when employed, he unavoidably destroys his employer. This extreme lack of luck is the key to his first completed mission in life by ruining the Fixico sisters, thus contributing to the moral balance of existence.

Although Tyndale is quite self-critical, he does not seem to notice when he is instinctively nice to people or behaves instinctively humanely, while he is very sarcastic about his experiences and abandons moral considerations deliberately. When he buys coffee for the self-appointed homeless or when he tries to make Napalm happy by giving him his once-in-a-lifetime chance to have a beautiful female companion, which in itself could be regarded as a miracle, he, unlike on other occasions, acts without pondering over the justification of his decision or making remarks about it, by which he reveals unpretentious motives, generosity and humanity. His sarcasm and self-exemption from the norms of society can be attributed to his bitter experience of the betrayal of the system, yet, although he formally denies all moral values, his mind cannot overwrite the moral programming ingrained in his personality. His fate

is to follow this set of rules unconsciously until he becomes aware of them and of the necessary difference between them and some other people's inclinations so that ultimately he cannot but act according to his values, which leads to a hopeful ending of his story.

This ending, however, cannot be paralleled with the religious delivery that is "always round the corner" (Fischer 29). The essential difference between these expectations is that while the religious behaviour presented in the book is only in an indirect relationship with the characters' desires, Tyndale embarks on a journey that promises the fulfilment of his dreams or might result in another failure. Still, with his personality having gone through considerable development, Tyndale faces the challenges of life, and his actions are carried out in order to live up to these challenges, while the religious people displayed in the novel distance themselves from the object of their desire by not taking the risk of a possible failure.

These characters insert a mediator: religion. Meeting certain demands of it, such as praying or going to church regularly, cannot be counted as deeds that would make any difference in their situation and bring them closer to their aims. They are so helpless and threatened by the possibility of an unfavourable outcome of any change that even if they do want to be cured or overcome difficulties in their lives, what they really need is a promise of delivery, no matter how prolonged or unlikely it may seem, in return for zero percent risk of failure. Their behaviour is an evasion of facing their current situation, which could be considered as hopeless – a possibility the thought of which is unbearable. However, exposing oneself to such awareness can also mean the beginning of a new phase of life, even if it requires the acceptance and integration of a new self-image and its relation to the world.

At the point of recognising his unhappy and uncontrollable situation as one where there is nothing left to lose, Tyndale has the strength to face the reason why he has never been able to achieve any personal or professional success. Surprisingly, his seemingly disappointing realisation, his coming to terms with his real self as

a consistent failure instead of being a successful businessman, finally provides him with the power to control the events of his own life. For the first time, he manages to secure a great success under his belt; therefore, his hope for happiness at the end of the novel is justified on the basis of what he has done and will do in order to achieve it.

As for religion as represented in the book, the last step to free will as opposed to giving in to determination is missing from it: that is, the willingness to decide one way and act according to that decision in order to achieve a certain aim, even if it means taking the risk of failure, is absent. A favourable outcome cannot be secured without running the risk of its opposite. Cherished until it comes true, only a permanent promise of success at an indeterminable point in the future has this advantage. This is the reason why manipulation is so easily imposed on the most vulnerable.

Conclusion

By the end of his mission to become God, Tyndale realises that convincing the world about his being omnipotent is an ambition beyond his competence. He thought this would be the ultimate way of pushing the boundaries of his existence; therefore, were it not for the character's deeper discovery of his own personality, he could account for this fact as yet another failure. However, by this point Tyndale has developed greater self-knowledge and knowledge about the world and other people and he seems to have had to go down the unlucky and unsuccessful paths so as to discover the way to feeling "at home". Controlling others' lives might seem to provide one with more power than controlling one's own, and the force of religious leaders to make their followers believe the unbelievable might be regarded as divine-like. Still, this power turns out to be restrictive for Tyndale as it requires positively inhuman features. What was considered absolute freedom by him in the beginning turns out to be a highly limited state of existence.

Due to this realisation, Tyndale has to abandon his divine plans; however, instead of being devastated that he has not been able to set himself free from the rules of the society that treated him so unfairly, he indeed gains freedom and a promise of happiness in the most unexpected way. He ultimately seizes a power that outnumbers the efficiency of any Lama's manipulative system: he gains control over the events of his life. This is the only factor that can be identified as almightiness for a human being. It results from Tyndale's overcoming his denial of being unable to succeed and to steer himself in the direction he earlier thought he should go so as to meet the expectations of society. Eventually, he manages to be his own God and achieves more than any religious leader under the illusion of being more powerful and divine than other human beings, which also provides him with a more tangible promise of a happy life than any fervent believer of any religion could hope for, who never takes the chance to make their dreams come true.

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Anna László

Humour in Tibor Fischer's Works

The focus of the present analysis will be twofold: on the one hand, key factors in humour, such as the absurd and the surreal will be demostrated in Fischer's books; on the other hand, cognitive humour theories will be discussed which shed a very different light on the humorous occurrences in Fischer's novels from traditional approaches to humour. Cognitive humour theories mainly focus on the concept of incongruity, according to which humour is due to a conflict between what one expects and what actually occurs. I will consider the questions of text formulation; requirements that contribute to a text being humorous; seemingly meaningless expressions that play a role in creating a humorous effect; and habits in communication that can also be part of creating humorous dialogues. There will be no mention of psychological and sociological approaches to humour, as these areas are beyond the scope of the present paper.

One of the first questions to ask is what is considered humorous. Whether a book is remembered as being humorous does not necessarily depend on the reader's first impression. The process is often as follows: A particular title draws our attention to a book. We might open it and leaf through it, catching a few funny lines. If our first impression is positive, we might decide to read it. By the time we finish reading we are able to form an opinion or alter our initial thoughts about its overall characteristics. In order to be able to proclaim Tibor Fischer a creatively humorous writer, one has to be familiar with more than one of his works. The reason for this is that he applies very different methods of humour in his books, so if one

does not appreciate one kind, there is still a chance that they will like another one.

In the case of Fischer, the reader is not trapped in a difficult situation, in which they first have to scan through the book in order to decide whether it is worth reading. Fischer's titles often suggest the nature of his writings. They might not imply their humorous nature; however, they are definitely notable and invite some attention. Titles such as *Under the Frog*, *Voyage to the End of the Room*, or *Good to be God* are not everyday catchphrases; they are creative and let the reader conclude that they presumably hide a creative story. Although creative is not equivalent to humorous, we like to connect the two concepts, since nowadays in order to come up with something original an author is compelled to resort to at least one of these qualities. However, the most novel solution is to combine the two and end up having something creatively humorous. In Fischer's case creativity is present in various forms: ideas like travelling around the world without leaving your room, deciding on becoming the Almighty, or employing unusual narrators gives ample opportunity to blend originality with humour. Besides introducing unusual topics, he applies various comic devices that have the power to allure the reader.

The application of humour does not have to be a conscious process, yet it can be consciously observed and analysed when recognized in the text. When looking behind the scenes, one is able to examine the various methods with the help of which all of Fischer's books become unique, all bearing one common characteristic feature, namely humour. Narrators, for instance, range from bowls through women to adolescent boys. Naturally, Fischer could not have relied on his own experiences in all these instances, thus some creativity was essential to create the character of a bowl or a woman.

People from various fields (psychology, linguistics, sociology, philosophy) have approached humour, naturally from different perspectives, and endeavoured to create general definitions to

answer questions such as what is humour or who determines whether a book is humorous. Out of the numerous attempts at the definition of humour, I will only deal with those that are relevant when talking about Fischer. T. S. Eliot's view on humour is well known: "Humour is a way of saying something serious"[1] (The Quotations Page). This very sentence can easily be applied to *Under the Frog*, which tells about an actual revolution that took place in Hungary in 1956, which in reality was not an event easily seen as humorous; still, Fischer manages to talk about the happenings in a way that conveys humour and seriousness at the same time. In addition, the anthology *A Cultural History of Humour* defines humour as "any message intended to produce a smile or a laugh" (Bremmer 14). The latter definition seems a little deceptive as the word *intended* is not further specified.

Perhaps the best way to approach humour in general is to circumscribe the concept with the help of different factors playing an important role in the production of humour. Here, I would like to turn to some cognitive concepts which might help in further analysing Fischer's style. Analysis from a cognitive perspective provides a fairly fresh view on literary works; in this case the main focus is to examine how humorous instances are conceptualised.

The notion of nonpredictability is a key factor in humour and it is shown preference in Fischer's novels. Nonpredictability refers to the cognitive linguistic phenomenon based on prototypes. It presumes that people think in terms of prototypes and if this presumption is violated by a nonprototypical piece of information, it evokes surprise. Nonpredictability is a necessary although not a sufficient element in producing a humorous effect. In fact, if nonpredictability is continuously provided throughout a book, the end will inevitably be startling, although not necessarily humorous. If the end is as far-fetched as possible, we are on the right path to evoke at least a smile on the reader's lips.

1 Quoted in "Priceless Gift of Laughter," Time, LVII (July 9, 1951), p. 88.

Nonpredictability is one of the methods exploited by Fischer, and his achievement lies in the fact that he is able to maintain a high level of nonpredictability until the end of his stories. This does not mean that the storyline is unpredictable; in fact the back cover of the novels invariably reveal the plot, thus reminding the reader that in Fischer's case the main focus is not on the storyline. Yet, his dialogues and descriptions make use of nonpredictability throughout his novels. It was mentioned above that one needs more than nonpredictability in order to provide a humorous outcome. The adequate formulation of the text is crucial. This leads us to Giora's theory about the formulation of texts in order to produce humour.

Giora is a linguist who specializes in cognitive linguistics and within that has dealt with joke theories as well as prototype theories. A number of rules are linked to her, all of which aim at examining the building up of jokes and funny texts and pictures. Giora's observations might explain the fact that Fischer's writings often trigger a laugh. The reason, based on Giora's theory, is that Fischer's texts are built up similarly to jokes. Of course, the fact that a text is built up as a joke does not presume that it would also trigger a laugh; nevertheless, with the help of Giora's notion of well-formed texts, some light will be shed on the possible reasons why readers often laugh when reading Fischer.

Giora discusses the importance of the precise formulation of jokes. In spite of the fact that we do differentiate between jokes and witty texts, her observations can be applied to Fischer's texts, since it is not the formulation that makes the difference. According to the cognitive viewpoint, a joke is funny if it violates the Graded Informativeness Requirement, i.e., instead of starting with the least informative piece of information and gradually arriving at the most informative one, the passage from the least informative piece of information to the most informative one is abrupt. In other words, the last element of information is "an extremely marginal member of the set evoked by the text" (Giora 465-485). If the Graded

Informativeness Requirement is violated, the punch line will be the least probable piece of information. The rule is based on prototypicality effects. If an answer is not prototypical, it triggers a certain surprise value. Although the least prototypical punch line is also the least relevant in the given context, it must not be entirely irrelevant to the discourse topic because then the gap between the information we already know and the punch line will be so wide that it would only result in a grimace, meaning that the possible humour could not be perceived.

When adapting the aforementioned rules to Fischer's writings, it is noticeable that many of his dialogues are built up in accordance with Giora's requirements. They are well-formed in the sense that they gradually move towards the most informative message and finally, with an abrupt shift, present an answer or reaction that is not predictable (465-485). The latest of Fischer's books, *Good to Be God*, features a number of this kind of dialogue: "My grandmother was of a generation that understood you weren't here to enjoy yourself. You didn't divorce, you hoped for a bus with bad brakes." (Fischer 22) The main idea of the book is revealed on the 30th page, also obeying the aforementioned rule. "I tweezer my last piece of sushi, and I decide to be God." (30) The importance of the sentence is not predictable in any way; not from the context and definitely not from the way the sentence starts. The protagonist sitting in a Japanese restaurant and having lunch counts as the least informative piece of information, whereas the second half of the sentence represents the abrupt shift to a completely unprototypical ending.

An especially interesting case is the gradual revelation of the death of the wife of one character. The following dialogue is an instance of a well-formed witty text that does not conform to the rules of a well-formed joke because the punch line is not the last element of a mini-dialogue but follows later on in the comment, yet it evokes laughter:

"Married?"

"Yes. Well, was. My wife passed away."

"I'm sorry. Is this recent?"

"Yesterday."

This answer is in itself shocking; however, a comment follows: "A sufficient intimacy has now evolved for Mike to reveal to us that he's killed his wife and has her body stashed in his car parked outside." (146) The punch line is embedded in the comment, but it still corresponds to the rules of nonpredictability and unprototypicality, the result of which is that the improbability of the comment surprises the reader. This very surprise might be the reason for the reader's laughter.

The use of conversational implicatures is yet another area exploited by Fischer. The term implicature, coined by Grice, refers to those utterances that only suggest but do not explicitly state a certain meaning (Li-juan 63-66). A definition of implicature is also provided by Radden and Dirven, who advocate the cognitive perspective: "the notion of implicature relates to implicitly communicated information, which is nevertheless as much part of our comprehension as explicitly stated information." (34) Due to our communication habits, according to which we read more meaning into an act of communication than it literally conveys, we are able to deduce the intended meaning. Grice's principle of relevance is applied in each and every case of conversational implicature that by definition means that "an optimal act of communication creates adequate contextual effects for a minimum of processing effort." (37) Implicatures can eventually become conventionalised, disregarding their original literal meaning, but they are, indeed, based on assumptions. A traditional example of conversational implicature is the question: "Where is the bathroom?" This is not asked merely in order to learn about the exact location; the aim is, rather, to know where to go to relieve oneself, usually immediately after the enquiry. By rejecting or cancelling assumptions we can produce a potentially humorous outcome. In the latter example, rejection

would take place if someone did not go to the bathroom right after enquiring about it, in which case the question would be rendered redundant. There is a dialogue in *Good to be God* that exemplifies a situation in which the conversational implicatures miss the target. The dialogue lets us suppose that the two people who are talking are old acquaintances and can count on each other:

> "It's me, Tyndale."
>
> "I don't know any Tyndale," Bizzy replies.
>
> "Yes you do, Bizzy."
>
> "I'm not Buzzy or whoever it is you're looking for," says Bizzy.
>
> "Yes, Bizzy you are Bizzy. And I'm Tyndale."
>
> "I'm not saying I'm Bizzy, but what proof do I have you're this alleged Tyndale?"
>
> "Bizzy, I'm out in Miami and I need an introduction."
>
> "Unknown stranger who's misdialled, let me tell you, I hardly know anyone in America."
>
> "I need… how shall I put this? ... I need someone not too honest."
>
> "Listen, Mr Weirdo, why are you asking me, me of all people, a question like that? How would I, a man with no criminal record, no appearances in court, a man whose tax returns make inspectors weep with joy at their naked probity, why would I know of someone not too honest? I have spent my whole life avoiding anyone even suspected of the teeny-weeniest wrongdoing. I abhor illegality in all its forms and I'm not just saying that because someone might be listening to this conversation–"
>
> "Do you know anyone in Miami or not?"
>
> "Well, lunatic caller whose identity is a complete mystery to me, and whose questions are deeply offensive, I only have one contact there, but he might be what you want." (33)

The conversation could be two lines long if all the statements and questions by the protagonist were not rejected by his friend. The

result is a witty dialogue with a punch line in the end that would not be witty if it came earlier. A further interesting example of rejecting a conversational implicature is present in the following sentence: "Let me pay for this, says Nelson, and I don't even feign protest, just in case he changes his mind." (5) The rejection takes place only as an option in the character's mind; nevertheless, it runs counter to, while also reinforcing, our expectations regarding politeness.

A number of theories on the comic are concerned with figurative language and its manifestations in humour. Ritchie and Dyhouse wrote several articles on this topic, especially about metaphors and how they contribute to humour. In an article that they published jointly, they discuss empty metaphors and their functions in English. The notion of empty metaphor can be linked to Fischer's book *Under the Frog*. The title is part of a Hungarian colloquialism that indicates the worst possible state of things. According to the aforementioned authors, empty expressions are uttered for pure amusement and there is no point in interpreting them, since their origins are often untraceable. Interpretation is even more pointless if the expression has lost parts of it, as is the case with this particular title. Instead of the content, what will be more important is the impression they create. Empty metaphors often make use of alliteration, such as in "fit as a fiddle," which assigns a certain playfulness to the expression. The authors discuss the subject of modifications effected on empty metaphors not found humorous enough due to conventionalisation. These modifications allow for the recognition of the original expression; in fact, the discrepancies between the original and the new expression make them sound more creative and witty. According to the authors, trying to explain such idioms and sayings results in nonsense (Ritchie 85-107).

Fischer extends the limits of playfulness and pairs up words that are normally not used together, producing some surprise which might lead to humorous results. What Fischer often does in his

books is closely linked to the notion of incongruity that refers to images or concepts that do not fit well together. The background of the concept of incongruity is the idea that people live in an orderly world and have come to expect certain patterns and norms in everything surrounding them. The picture of what is standard varies from individual to individual based on their experiences in life, apart from some general patterns which are shared by everybody. Therefore what will appear incongruous will also vary from individual to individual. This explanation sheds some light on why some of the readers of Fischer laugh out loud, others merely smile, and yet others read his books with a poker face. Either way, *Good to be God* displays a few examples of incongruity, such as "he is suffering from hilarity" (231), in which case a clash is present between a word implying something negative and a word with a positive connotation. In an orderly world we expect to suffer from diseases, since they are more often related to distress. However, the word hilarity cancels this expectation and evokes a different image which is probably not that unpleasant. Further examples, such as "I put the holiness on pause" (165) and "Then a generous helping of delay at the airport…" (6) also bring together ideas usually not found in juxtaposition. The simile "utterly out of place, like trouts in an armchair" (76) is unconventional due to the inconsistent images it evokes, which might make the reader smile or laugh out loud.

The identity of the narrator of *The Collector Collector*, as well as the idea of *Voyage to the End of the Room* lead us to key factors in humour, such as the absurd and the surreal. Although all of Fischer's novels are interspersed with absurd and surreal elements that include bizarre situations and nonsense, the two books mentioned above deploy the most instances of these elements. Before further analyzing the novels, a crucial distinction must be made between the concepts of absurd and surreal. The term *absurd* refers to "the dialectical experience of an individual trying to relate to an irrational world; and it is this way of existing, through a passionate choice, a revolt against any moral or metaphysical absolutes, and a

total commitment to freedom, that becomes the focal point of existential thought." (Baker 1)

The plot of *Good to be God* can be paralleled with this definition of the absurd as the protagonist, Tyndale, believes that the world he lives in is not functioning in his favour. For a while he attempts to fit in, yet he is convinced that he deserves more and figures that the only way to shape the world to fit his demands is if he positions himself above everybody and everything else. He proclaims himself God and from then on behaves as if he did not have any mundane concerns.

It is noteworthy that absurdist fiction is not centred around humour, but on the behaviour of humans under unusual circumstances. It is the unusual circumstances that carry the possibility of humour. On the other hand, dictionaries make use of more common terms to explain the absurd, such as ridiculous, incongruous, or unreasonable, words that can be easily connected to Fischer's tales. A bowl appearing as the narrator of a story is obviously unreasonable, which might account for the funniness of the book. Although an inanimate object in the place of a thinking, talking, and feeling narrator can already be the source of humour, the reader may still feel it insufficient to make the book funny. Due to the nonconformist nature of absurdist fiction, the reader is often confused as to the meaning of the story. The moral is not explicit, the traditional plot structure is missing, and the characters are ambiguous. It often happens that first we have to unravel these loose ends in order to be able to decide whether what we read is indeed funny. In my view, this is where writing style and writing technique can be differentiated. A story can be absurd without being humorous and vice versa. Therefore, what makes Fischer's books absurd and at the same time humorous is the combination of unrealistic ideas and linguistic methods producing funny or witty effects.

Surrealism is often seen as part of the avant-garde movements starting in the 20th century. Artists, not only the Surrealists but the Dadaists and the Futurists as well, called for a new kind of art that

was random, jarring, and illogical (Bremmer 45). In spite of the fact that they took themselves seriously, they aspired to break the solemnity of art; consequently, their works were invariably humorous by intention. Fischer's *The Collector Collector* is interesting in the sense that it combines the normal rules of logic with the completely implausible. The whole book describes everyday happenings, yet we notice unusual elements in the depicted situations; for instance, the ridiculously frequent break-ins, as well as the recurrent images of the frozen iguana and the pickled beetroot. Fischer creates an atmosphere in which the impossible melts into reality and suddenly seems plausible. Rosa incorporates the bowl into her life with such naturalness that the reader is ready to forget the unreliability of the narrator soon after the beginning. What leads the reader to accept and believe whatever is presented is sometimes due to repetition, as we have seen, and at other times to the reactions of the protagonist.

To conclude, my aim was to give an overall analysis of some of Tibor Fischer's books in general as well as in particular in order to see what accounts for the different reactions on the readers' part. Apart from traditional humour forms, cognitive linguistic humour theories were introduced to provide a new and original view on literary texts, since it has not been customary to analyse them from such a perspective. Cognitive linguistic sources extensively deal with examining humour in written texts; and the study of its connection to literature, especially to humorous literary texts is an area that offers abundant research possibilities.

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The essays in this volume were written on Tibor Fischer's works by Hungarian students majoring in English.Their contextualisations of Fischer's novels within Hungarian history, English literature, Aristotelian philosophy, narratology, or cognitive linguistics are a tribute to Fischer's shameless intellect and narrative comedy. They also prove, quite delightfully, that students will respond to literature with the freshness of vision their age offers, and with the creative energy their readings liberate in them.

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